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No. 554.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., June 5, 1889.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. XLIII.



BULL FORCED THE DRUMMER DETECTIVE BACK ALONG THE PLATFORM UNTIL HE
AT LAST SWUNG OVER THE STEPS.

OR,

The Drummer Detective's Big Lay-out.

A Romance of the Hidden River.

BY GEO. C. JENKS,
AUTHOR OF "THE DRUMMER DETECTIVE,"
"RUBE ROCKET, THE TENT DETECTIVE,"
"SLEEPLESS-EYE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SECRET FOE.

"Yes, yes, yes! Here it is, sure enough. The chart is right, I know. On the right of this canyon, some 2,000 feet above the level of the plain. Ha, ha! I have found it. I have found it!"

The speaker was a little man, prematurely aged, with cunning and avarice written in every wrinkle and twist of his dirty countenance. He was sitting at a table in a dark little office in the rear of the eighth story of one of Chicago's im-

mense business blocks. His surroundings, while sordid enough, seemed to indicate that the occupant was not so poor as he was miserly, and that he could have had his room comfortably, or even luxuriously furnished, had he so desired. As it was, the cheap carpet, worn into holes here and there, was permeated with the dust of who could tell how many years; the three chairs, including that in which he sat, while massive, were evidently relics of a bygone age; and the one window looking upon a high blank brick wall, was so grimy that the wall could not be discerned save by the most intent gaze.

The only things in the room that were not old were several maps, showing territory in Colorado, Arizona and other Western States, or plans of lots in the suburbs of Chicago. Another map, which was spread out on a large, solid table containing numerous locked drawers, was nothing but a dingy sheet of paper, creased by folds until it was almost ready to fall apart, but evidently regarded by the old man poring over it as of the utmost value.

A gas-jet which hung immediately over the table, cast flickering shadows upon the map or chart, where the old man's finger, after wandering doubtfully here and there, as he referred from time to time to certain entries in a well-worn note-book, had at last stopped, with a confident tap, in the very center of the paper.

He chuckled softly, and took his finger from the paper so that he could rub his hands with a sly enjoyment of his discovery, whatever it was, that was just the gesture you would have expected from him.

"So, so! Now that I know where it is, the next thing is to get some trustworthy fellow to find it and bring it to me. Ha, ha! I must be cautious though. It will require great care. I think I have the right man, if he will only do it. Peachblossom! He is as brave as a lion, and as honest as the day. Moreover, he can be trusted to keep his mouth shut. Yes, Peachblossom is the man, if I can get him. Hello! Who is that?"

The last sentence was uttered in a half-shriek, as the old man hastily folded his chart, and with the note-book, hid it inside his rusty black coat.

He got up, and looking around the room to make sure that there was nothing in sight to excite the cupidity or curiosity of a stranger, hobbled to the door, turned a key, shot back the Yale dead-latch, and opened the door.

"Oh, Mr. Grattan—Peachblossom! How do you do? Have been waiting for you. Come in."

The old man was rubbing his hands effusively. Suddenly he placed his hand on his visitor's arm and looked suspiciously into the dark hall outside the room.

"Who is that behind you?" he demanded.

"A friend of mine, upon whom I can depend," was the short answer.

"In the business?"

"In the business."

The old man somewhat reluctantly beckoned to the man in the background, and all three entered the little office, which its owner fastened as it was before.

In the light of the gas-jet the two new-comers could be plainly seen, and the old man looked them over from head to foot.

The person whom he addressed as Peachblossom, or Mr. Grattan, was a young man of about thirty years of age, with light curly hair and a blonde mustache. He was faultlessly dressed, with a well-brushed silk hat, irreproachable shoes, and a closely-buttoned Prince Albert coat, in the lapel of which nestled a rosebud. Altogether he looked like a petted child of fortune, whose only mission in life was to enjoy himself. But there was a gleam in his dark eyes as he quickly took an inventory of his surroundings, that told of plenty of reserve power, and it was easy to believe that Peachblossom, the famous "Drummer Detective," was one of the most able and fearless of those who had made the name of the Chicago Detective Bureau dreaded by outlaws all over the West.

"What is this gentleman's name?" asked the old man, pointing to the Drummer Detective's companion.

"William Welch, but known among his associates as Red Bill. He works with me whenever I undertake an important job, such as I understand this to be, Mr.—Mr.—"

The detective hesitated and looked at a card that he held in his right hand.

"My name is Matthew Thorne," put in the old man. "Land-agent and real estate operator."

"So I see by your card. I had forgotten for the moment, and you do not keep a sign on your door."

"I do not. My business and my name, too, are my own affair, and I do not care to publish them to the world. Sit down, Mr. Grattan, and Mr.—"

"Call me Bill. That's the name I like. 'Sides, it's shorter nor Red Bill," suggested the owner of the cognomen, whose large crop of bushy red whiskers showed why he was thus called.

"Well, Bill, then," acquiesced Thorne. "Now, Mr. Grattan, to business. You already

know something about what I require of you, if you are willing to undertake the mission."

"I am willing," remarked Peachblossom, carelessly.

"Good. You have had considerable experience in the West, haven't you?"

"Now, see here, 'Squire, I've knowed Peachblossom for five years, an I tell you he's dangerous when he's stopped. He's quicker 'n truer on ther shoot than any man I know, and he'll pull and drop his man with the best galoot as ever got within sight of ther Rockies. Does he know ther West? Wal, you're shoutin'!" put in Red Bill, effusively.

"That will do, Bill," said the detective, quietly.

"I'm shet!" answered Red Bill.

"There is a shanty, a dug-out, on the west side of a canyon near the Colorado River," said the old man, in a husky whisper, drawing near to the detective confidentially. "Find that shanty, and then— See here!"

He took Peachblossom to an old table standing under the grimy window, upon which he cautiously spread the worn paper, and, with his note-book for a guide, showed the detective a certain spot.

"There is the exact place," whispered the old man, excitedly. "It was buried ten years ago, in a tin box, fastened with a brass padlock."

"Yes."

"By its side there is gold-dust to the value of twenty thousand dollars. The dust is yours, on condition that you bring me the box and its contents."

"What are its contents?"

The old man leered at the detective, as putting his hand to his mouth as if to prevent the words reaching the ears of Red Bill, he answered, softly:

"I'll tell you, because I like you, and I know that I can trust you (though I make it a rule never to trust anybody). There is a will in that box that will change the ownership of property in Chicago worth two million dollars."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that one of the richest families in this city are in the possession of money to which they have no right, and that I will prove it."

"But what is your object in this? Are you employed by the rightful heir?"

"No. I don't know where he is. I have the secret, and I shall sell it to—"

Here the old man interrupted himself hastily, and resumed on another tack:

"Well, well. That does not matter to you. You get me the box, and I will not interfere with you and the gold-dust that you will find there. When I get the will I shall know what to do with it. When will you start, eh? When will you start?"

The old man was nervously folding up the chart into a very small space, as if he hardly knew what he was doing, while keeping his eyes fixed on the face of Peachblossom.

"To-night," answered the detective, briefly.

"To-night," repeated Matthew Thorne, rubbing his hands harder than ever. "That's excellent—excellent. About traveling expenses? I suppose—"

"Never mind. I will attend to that," interrupted the young man. "I may as well confess to you, Mr. Thorne, that I am not undertaking this mission out of any regard for you, nor for the profit I may derive from it. I am going for private reasons of my own—"

The old man started fearfully, and his bleary eyes twinkled with suspicion.

"You don't mean—" he faltered.

"To betray my trust? No," returned Peachblossom contemptuously. "Do not be afraid. I will be faithful. I will bring back the tin box, if I can get it, and that is all I want to do with you!"

"You are a rather peculiar young man," observed Matthew.

"Perhaps. Now give me the chart and the notebook. There is nothing more, is there?"

"Nothing more. But—I cannot let the chart and notebook out of my hands. I will copy what you will need."

Taking some sheets of legal cap paper from a drawer in the large table, unlocking and locking it with a key attached to a ring that was itself secured to some inside portion of his dress by a stout steel chain, old Matthew sat down and went methodically to work.

He evinced considerable artistic skill by the way in which he reproduced on the legal cap the lines and shaded spaces that, with the aid of the notes in the book, would guide a reasonably intelligent person to the spot where the precious tin box and the bags of gold-dust were lying hidden from all human sight.

Red Bill sat back in his chair, with his feet extended, and pulling his long red beard through his hands, watching the old man at his work with unfavorable eye. It was evident that Red Bill did not admire Matthew Thorne, and any one acquainted with the rough miner-detective would have known that he was itching to take hold of the old man and hammer his head upon the table.

Peachblossom saw this in the countenance of his follower, and shook his head at him, smilingly. The Drummer Detective had saved Red

Bill's life in Colorado once, as some of my readers will remember; and the handsome, well-dressed, careless young man had only to hint to the burly miner that he wished a thing, to have it carried out, whatever it might be.

Meanwhile the old man went slowly but surely on with his work. He finished the chart, and then copied some notes from the book.

"There," he said, at last. "There is the chart and all the information you need. Put them carefully away, will you?"

He handed the copies to the Drummer Detective, who opened his Prince Albert coat, and placed the papers in an inside pocket. The movement disclosed a dirk-knife in a sheath hanging to a belt on his right hip.

It was only in view for a second, but the sharp eyes of the old man saw it, and he chuckled approvingly.

"Good!" he croaked. "I see you are prepared for emergencies."

"Always," was the brief response.

"Well, I believe that is all, eh? You say you start to-night. Then I shall not see you again till you come back. Telegraph me when you have anything to say to me, in cipher, of course. The key to it is among the instructions I have copied from my note-book."

"I have been thinking since," remarked the detective, slowly, "that while I could start to-night, I had better wait until to-morrow at noon. Then I can take the 'Thunderbolt,' the fast train, on the C. B. & Q., and make better time than if I started this evening."

"Well, I leave that to you. Of course, you know your business," agreed the old man, as he rubbed his hands in a satisfied way, after putting the original chart and note-book in his pocket, and buttoning his rusty coat over it.

It was now quite dark outside, and the single gas-jet did not light up the office very well, except over the table.

Had it been lighter there would have been a possibility of one of the three noticing that their proceedings had been closely watched for the last hour, and that every word spoken had been greedily devoured by a person of whose presence they had no suspicion.

High up in the wall of the office, at the right of the door, was a transom, carefully bolted on the inside, the windows of which were so dingy that they appeared to be painted. Indeed, they had been, long ago, but some of the paint had peeled and dropped off, and dirt had taken its place, without old Matthew Thorne ever being disturbed by it. The room into which the transom looked had not been occupied for years, and had been used as a lumber room for old desks, chairs and furniture since the last tenant shut himself in there when Matthew Thorne was a much younger man than at the time this story opens.

Yet at one of the dingy panes of glass, of which a piece some four inches square was broken out at one corner, was pressed an eager face, with staring eyes and a row of large yellow teeth that seemed to gnash and threaten the old man as their owner watched and listened.

CHAPTER II.

MURDER.

THE face had been at the window before Peachblossom and Red Bill had entered the room. Then it had disappeared for a time, only to come back when the old man and the detective were looking over the chart together.

"So, so," muttered the eavesdropper. "I think I know now where to get hold on something worth having. This is better than I expected. You old rascal, Mat Thorne! You thought you could get the better of Bullard Worth, did yer? Now, I'll lead you in er game ez I think will end in my takin' ther pot with er full hand!"

As the owner of the staring eyes and yellow teeth, who referred to himself as Bullard Worth, made this observation, Matthew Thorne was just showing Peachblossom and Red Bill out of the room.

"Well, good-by!" croaked the old man. "Do not let me wait long before I hear from you and good luck to you!"

"I'll probably wire you from Denver, although that will depend upon circumstances," replied the detective, briefly, as he left the room, closely followed by Red Bill.

The old man carefully closed the door as his two visitors left, and then, slapping his breast, over which, in the inside pocket of his coat, reposed the chart and note-book, he chuckled comfortably as he threw himself into his chair at the large table.

"Ha, ha, ha! Now I have the thing in train. If Mr. Peachblossom finds the will I shall be all right; and if he does not find it, why, I still have the chart, and I can get some one else to try. There is danger in the work—more than that young dude of a detective expects, perhaps. Ah, well! There are plenty more detectives in the world, even if that one should get rubbed out. I don't expect he will, however. He has plenty of pluck, and he has been in Colorado before. They say he is a dead sure shot, too. So much the better. He will need to be if all I have heard of that rancho on the Rockies is true. Ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" croaked another voice in his very ear, so much like his own that he started as if the grave itself had spoken.

The old man started up, and then dropped back into his chair, powerless with surprise and fright.

"What? You here, Bullard Worth?" he gasped.

Standing opposite with his two hands resting upon the table, was the individual who had so lately been watching the proceedings in the room from the dirty transom high up in the wall. His full-length disclosed a man not less than six feet in height, spare of build, but indicating an amount of wiry strength often associated with such a frame. His long arms terminated in bony, sinewy hands, which, tightly clinched, as their knuckles touched the table, seemed to bespeak the cruelty and utter lawlessness of the owner. He was dressed fairly well, in a business suit such as might be worn by a millionaire merchant, or his porter, for dress does not always mark the distinction in rank in American cities, especially in the West. Upon his head he wore a black slouch hat, pulled well down over his forehead. He might have been any age between twenty-five and forty-five.

A grin of sarcastic triumph exposed all his yellow teeth, as he looked straight into the eyes of the trembling Thorne, and that he enjoyed the situation was evident at a glance.

"How—how—did you get here?" asked Matthew, feebly, after a moment's silence, as he tried to release himself from the basilisk power of the other's eye.

Bullard Worth moved his right hand from the table to point carelessly over his shoulder, and the old man saw that the small transom in the wall, which he had never considered worth notice as a possible entrance to his den, was wide open. In fact, the space of the transom was so small that only a thin, active fellow like Worth could have squeezed through.

"I just come through that hole, Matthew, old pard. I did not want an introduction to that rooster with ther flower in his coat ez jist went out, don't yer see?"

"Now you are here, what is your business?"

"Ah, that's right. That's ther sort o' talk ez I like. Bizness—bizness!"

"I am always ready for business," observed the old man shortly.

"Air yer? Wal, now, pard, I'm glad ter hear it, fer I ain't got long ter fool with yer."

"Bullard!"

"Wal?"

"I don't like that word that you keep on using."

"What word d'ye mean?"

"Pard."

"Pard? Why, ain't yer my pard? Or, ter be quite c'rect—warn't yer my pard when we did that thar job at Pueblo?"

"Hush! There might be some one within hearing. Haven't you any more sense than you always had?"

"Seems not," answered the tall man carelessly. "Howsumever, ef you're 'fraid thar mought be listeners around hyar, why I won't say nothin'—pard!"

He seemed to find a sardonic satisfaction in repeating this word, particularly now that he knew it offended Matthew Thorne.

"Where did you come from?" asked the old man, disregarding the other's persistent attempt to annoy him.

"Never mind whar I come from. I'm hyar now, and I mean business."

"Go on."

"You hev just given that feller er job—"

Thorne made a deprecating gesture.

"Now, don't deny it," went on Bullard sternly. "I see'd and heerd ther whole confab, an' yer can't throw no sand in my eyes. Talking about sand, you ain't got any to spare, nobow, 'less ye'r a different man to what yer wuz three years ago."

"I wish you would get through with what you have to say. My time is precious to-night."

Bullard Worth straightened himself to his full height, until his head was almost lost in the gloom that surrounded the gas-jet over the table. Then he bent over until his staring eyes and yellow teeth were close to the old man's face.

"Pard, I am er-goin' ter hev a hand in this hyer business with ther feller ez they call ther Drummer Detective."

"What do you mean?"

"Just this—Say, pard, can't yer give er feller er cheer? It's rather tiresome ter stand up all ther while."

Old Matthew pointed to a chair. Bullard brought it close to the old man's side, so that he could sit facing him, with his elbow resting on the table and with his bony right hand waving freely to point his remarks.

"Now, pard," he resumed. "I'll tell yer jist whar you stand with me. Thet job up near Pueblo didn't turn out ez good ez it mought hev done, but it warn't no fault uv mine. I did all ez er man could do, an' ef I got left it wuz only because ther feller hed taken ther precaution to leave his stuff in safe hands afore he

took his trip through Colorado. You know how I had to fight my way out of that thar matter, an' how I never give you away, though you put up ther job. Ther rich English cove ez I wuz to hold up wuz a good-natured rooster, arter all, so he didn't press the charge of highway robbery ag'in me, an' I got away."

"Yes, yes. I know. Never mind about going over all the circumstances now," interrupted the old man, impatiently.

"You wait till I'm through—will yer, pard?" demanded the other, fiercely. "Bull Worth knows what he hez ter do, 'thout your advice, this time. You went back on me thet time, yer know. It wuzn't your fault that I didn't git swung up ter ther nearest tree, with a sign pinned to my vest, tellin' why I died."

Thorne shrugged his shoulders, but did not speak.

"Now," resumed Bullard, "I'm goin' ter that ranch whar you sent Peachblossom, an' I'm goin' ter try ef I can't get thet thar box—that tin box ez you air so anxious to hev."

"You?"

There was no mistake about the terror of Matthew Thorne as he uttered this word.

"Yes, me! Why not? I know jist whar it is. You explained keerfully enough to ther Drummer. Ef he kin find it, why can't I?"

The face of the old man became livid with rage.

"Why can't you?" he croaked. "Why can't you? I'll tell you why. You dare not go within a hundred miles of the place. That is one reason. Another thing—though you may have heard my directions to the detective, you could not follow the chart from your sneaking hiding-place up there, nor could you read what was entered in my note-book. Peachblossom has a copy of the chart and notes with him—"

"And ther 'riginal of 'em?"

"I have safely in my pocket."

"Perhaps you will give 'em to me."

"What?" fairly shrieked Thorne.

"You heard what I said. And don't make so much noise. It wouldn't be safe for yer ef any one wuz ter come while I'm hyar. I mought give yer away, don't yer know."

"How long are you going to stay here bothering me?" asked the old man, with forced calmness.

"Until you give me a copy of thet thar chart and ther directions for findin' thet tin box."

The old man laughed scornfully.

"You won't do it, eh?"

Matthew laughed again.

"Then I must hev ther 'riginal."

"Now, see here, Mr. Worth, I have had enough of this nonsense," said Matthew, rising.

"Sit down, Mat, old pard."

The other forced him back into his chair with an irresistible push of his bony right hand.

Now, for not the first time in the interview Matthew Thorne's face showed that he was frightened.

"What do you mean by that?" he gasped.

"I mean ez I'm er-goin' ter hev thet thar paper, old pard, and right now," hissed Bull Worth.

There was no mistake about the determination of the miscreant, as he pushed his face close to that of the old man and stretched his mouth so that it showed the full extent of the row of yellow fangs.

"Air yer goin' ter give me them papers?"

"No."

"Yer ain't?" with a fiercer intonation.

"No, I tell you."

"Wal, then, I know what I hev ter do!"

With a spring, Bullard had thrown himself upon the old man, and, with his bony fingers clutching the throat of his helpless victim, had dragged him from the chair and thrown him backward upon the table.

Old Matthew's eyes rolled up in agony, and Bullard, who did not wish to kill him, released his throat, while he hastily tore open the coat in the inside pocket of which he knew he should find the coveted paper and book.

The old man feebly resisted, but, already weakened by the desperate attack upon him, he was powerless to prevent the other in his work of robbery.

"Where are the papers, curse you?" growled Bull, as he fumbled inside the coat, but could not immediately find the pocket.

The old man gurgled some reply, but his words were undistinguishable.

"Oh, yer ain't so bad ez all thet," growled Bull. "I didn't hurt yer. Ah! Hyar they are."

He had felt the packet, and now drew it forth in triumph.

Turning his back upon the table, upon which lay the apparently unconscious form of Thorne, he hastily examined the chart and note-book to see that they were what he wanted.

He chuckled as he traced out on the chart the route southwest from Pueblo to the very verge of the Rocky Mountains, where he had already heard the precious tin box was deposited.

"Yes, hyar's the place, and we'll see whether ther Drummer or Bull Worth hez ther best chance ter git ther dust an' ther will. Ha, ha!"

He put the packet, which comprised the note-book and the chart, fastened together by a rub-

ber, in the inside pocket of his vest, and was buttoning that garment, when suddenly two cold hands clasped his throat from behind with the tenacity of desperation.

"Cuss it! What's that?" he spluttered, as he tried to throw off the clutch and turn around.

There was no answer, but the cold hands gripped him tighter. At the same moment he thought he heard some one outside the door of the room in the dark hall.

He could not shake off his unseen assailant, but he felt that there was no time to lose. Like a snake one of his bony hands stole to the waistband of his trowsers and grasped the handle of a glittering bowie.

Swinging himself half-around, still with the cold hands on his neck, he struck with all his force behind him.

There was a smothered cry and the cold hands relaxed their hold.

Worth, still with the handle of the knife in his fingers, turned and saw—the dead face of old Matthew Thorne as he lay back on the table!

Fearfully the murderer looked around him. He was quite alone, save for the body of his victim. In an instant he had made up his mind what to do. He saw a white handkerchief lying beneath the table. He picked it up and laid it over the face of the corpse. He could not bear to look at those dreadful wide-open eyes.

As he placed the handkerchief over the face he saw in the corner of the white cambric the initials "J. G."

"Aha! J. G.—Joe Grittan. Now, Mr. Peachblossom, Drummer Detective, I think chance will help me to fasten this little matter on you if there is any trouble to come of it."

With a hideous grin he picked up the keys that had fallen on the floor when he took the packet from Matthew Thorne's pocket, selected that opening the door, and turned it in the lock. Then he stood upon a chair and closed the transom carefully, and looking around him to make sure that there was nothing in sight to point to the real murderer, put the keys on the table by the side of the old man's body, and then left the room.

The elevator had stopped running for the day, for it was about seven o'clock in the evening. Heran quietly and swiftly down the stairs without meeting any one, and made his way unobserved to the street.

And the body of Matthew Thorne, with the wide-open eyes hidden by the handkerchief of the Drummer Detective, lay on the table in the dingy little room, to set the police of Chicago hunting for a clew to the most diabolical murder of the year.

CHAPTER III.

THE DETECTIVE WAS THERE.

THE "Thunderbolt" was rushing headlong toward Denver on the next afternoon.

Leaving Chicago at fifty-five minutes past noon this fast train is due in Denver about five o'clock the next afternoon, and the engineer, with his hand on the throttle valve of the best engine on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad is speeding merrily over the level prairie toward the Rocky Mountains that he can almost see in a blue haze in the far West.

About three o'clock in the afternoon, when the engineer had settled down to a good twenty mile run before he stopped again, he leaned back in the cab and looked calmly ahead, without troubling himself about any thing under the sun. A clear, level track, a good engine, everything about it oiled and polished to perfection, and a fireman upon whom he could thoroughly rely, were enough to make the engineer feel satisfied with himself and all the world, and that was his condition, as the "Thunderbolt" bounded over the prairie.

"Say, Jim, wood up a little more. We have a grade ahead of us," he remarked carelessly to his fireman.

The grade he spoke of was a very easy one, and would have been hardly noticeable to a casual eye, but the engineer was in that contented frame of mind in which he did not care to lack anything that would make him feel a little better.

The fireman obediently shoveled in some more coal, and the furnace roared with a little more vehemence as he closed the iron door of the fire-box with a cheery clang.

"Say, pard, don't git mad, but I'm stuck."

The engineer and fireman both started, and the former involuntarily put his hand on the double-action six-shooter in the hip-pocket of his overalls.

"Hold on, pard! Don't shoot, I'm harmless," continued the voice.

At the same moment a man with staring eyes and yellow teeth, in a neat business suit and slouch hat, crawled over the coal in the tender and raised his hand deprecatingly.

"Where did you come from?" demanded the engineer, still with his hand on his weapon.

"Don't say nothin', pard," answered the stranger, who, it is unnecessary to say, was no other than Bullard Worth. "I hed ter make this train, an' I only jist got ter ther depot in time. I hadn't time ter get no ticket, an' I jist scrambled up wharever I could. I 'lighted on

ther front platform on ther baggage car next ter ther tender, an' hyar I am."

"Pretty thin story," commented the engineer, under his breath. Then aloud: "Yer can't ride on ther cab. It's against the rules of the C. B. & Q."

"Wal, what am I ter do? Yer won't chuck me off on ther track while ther train is er runnin' I s'pose?"

"Don't know. I might," returned the engineer, with a careless toss of the head. "I've done it to other tramps afore now."

"Wal, I ain't no tramp!"

"I don't know that."

Something in the engineer's nonchalant tone stung the by no means equable-tempered Bull Worth. With an oath he sprung from the tender into the cab, and dealt the engineer a tremendous blow under the chin with his clinched fist.

The engineer dropped among the cinders and coal dust at his feet as if he had been shot. But he was up again in a second, and, forgetting everything in the pain inflicted by the stranger, put up his hands in truly scientific style, and at once engaged in a rough-and-tumble fisticuff fight with Bullard Worth, in which both were in imminent danger of falling out of the cab.

"You blamed fool!" spluttered Bull, when the two had exchanged half a dozen hearty raps, during which the fireman had tried to get between them to help his partner, the engineer, but in vain.

The application of this term to the engineer stirred up the vials of his wrath to the boiling point, and, exerting all his strength and skill, he twisted his foot around Bull and threw him in a heap in a corner of the cab, holding him there with a knee in his chest.

"I'm a blamed fool, am I?" hissed the engineer in the ear of the fallen hero. "Here, Jim, help me hold this fellow while I get a piece of cord to tie him. I'll hand him over to the police at the next stop."

The fireman, keeping a sharp lookout ahead over the level track, had slowed down the engine during the quarrel, to guard against accidents, and at this moment started as the gong over his head rung sharply two—three times, as the cord was jerked impatiently by the conductor from the baggage car behind.

"Stop her, Jim! I can hold this fellow for a minute or two. The crew can come and take him off my hands as soon as we pull up."

"All right," assented the fireman.

Whatever might have been the purpose of Bullard Worth in crawling over the tender to the cab, he realized that his safest course now would be to get away, if he could.

He had been taken at a disadvantage by the sudden onslaught of the engineer, but his sinewy limbs were not such as could be held down against his will by any but a remarkably strong man.

He heard the directions of the engineer to his fireman, and recognized the sound of the gong as that communicating with the conductor. It would not do for him to be found here, and yet he must ride on the train somehow.

The great driving-wheel of the locomotive turned slower and slower, the piston-rods ran in and out with more and more deliberation, and the long train was coming to a standstill. Dozens of heads were protruding from the windows, and the conductor and brakemen were leaning far out from the various platforms.

For an instant Bullard thought of the bowie-knife at his belt.

"No—no. That won't do! They'd find me out, sure, ef I killed him," he muttered, indicating that only his own personal safety restrained his hand. "Cuss him! I kin git away somehow."

He was in a kneeling posture, with his heels against the locker at the side of the cab, with the engineer holding him backward against it. As the train slowed up, and he knew that there would be a crowd around the engine in another minute, who would make short work of him, he saw that he must act quickly.

Gathering all his strength, he braced his feet firmly against the locker, and bending his head, upon which he still wore his black slouch hat, he butted the engineer in the stomach with tremendous force.

The movement was successful. The engineer fell back as if he had been shot, coming into collision with the fireman, and, just as the engine came to a stop, knocking him out of the cab backward, head-first, and falling upon him.

Quick as thought, Bull sprung to the lever of the locomotive, threw the throttle valve wide open, and ere any one could reach him, was speeding the train over the prairie at a rate that fully maintained its right to the title of "Thunderbolt."

The grade that the engineer had referred to some time before, and for which he had directed his fireman to throw in some more fuel, had been passed. That is, the summit had been reached, and the train was now on a slight down grade. It was nothing to speak of—only the trifling undulation of the prairie—but such as it was, it assisted slightly in maintaining the break-neck speed at which the desperado was running the engine.

"Ha, ha! Now I hev things my own way, fer a little while, but I dunno how long it will last," he reflected, with a chuckle. "I can't keep this hyar thing up more'n a few minutes, 'cause they'll be comin' over ter see what's ther trouble, an' then my name is Dennis."

Bullard Worth, in the course of a checkered career, had had experience in the driving of locomotive engines, and he knew that the great machine under his control was perfectly safe so far as its safety depended upon intelligent management. The people in the train behind him, however, were not so easy in their minds. They had seen the regular engineer and fireman lying in a disgruntled heap at the side of the tank, and all that they knew was that the engine was now in the hands of villains whose number, in their excited imaginations, ranged from six to sixty.

Bull thought of all this, and laid his plans accordingly.

"If," thought he, "they don't know how many they are, they will be cautious about coming out. Guess I'll frighten them anyhow!"

In his pockets were two revolvers. Drawing one, he fired six shots in quick succession at the door of the baggage car, through which, if anywhere, a rescuing party must come.

He grinned as he saw how the heavy bullets splintered the thick wood of the door. Then he hastily threw out the empty cartridges, and filled the six chambers of his weapon again.

Thoroughly familiar with the railroad over which he was traveling, he knew that he would come to a station before long at which the train would be obliged to stop.

He must get out of his present predicament before he reached it. His object was to get into one of the cars, and travel quietly to Denver. He had told the engineer the truth partly, when he gave his reason for crawling over the tender. It was not only that he was late in arriving at the depot, but he did not desire to be seen by two other passengers on the train, these passengers having the reprehensible habit of staring about them more than Mr. Bullard Worth could regard with approval. These two passengers, it is perhaps hardly necessary to say, were Peachblossom, the Drummer Detective, and his trusty lieutenant, Red Bill.

Replacing his revolver in his pocket he took his slouch hat from his head, doubled it up into a small space, and hid it inside his clothing. Then he produced a silk skull-cap from some pocket in his coat, and placing it on his head, looked at himself in a little mirror fastened against the side of the cab.

"Aha! Thet thar won't do. Thet Peachblossom 'ud know me d'reckly with this hyar mug. I must kiver it up somehow."

From another of his mysterious pockets he drew forth a heavy false beard. With dexterous hand he arranged it upon his face, and again glancing at the mirror, saw with approval that he was an entirely different person in appearance to the Bullard Worth who, a few moments before, had taken forcible possession of the engine of the "Thunderbolt."

With one last glance at the miles of level track ahead, and with a workmanlike touch of the various taps, knobs, levers, and valves that controlled the mighty power of the engine, the desperado saw that everything was running as smoothly as it could, barring accidents.

"Now for it," he muttered.

Like a monkey he crawled over the coal in the tender, and then, placing his foot upon the hand-rail of the platform of the baggage car, he drew himself up and reached the roof.

Softly and cautiously he crept along, for he did not mean to let the occupants of the car know that he was over their heads. If he could only get down and reach one of the passenger cars unobserved! But that seemed impossible. Everybody in the train would naturally be on the alert, and he would be seen and secured in an instant were he to show himself. He was, indeed, in a quandary, and he saw no way out of it.

Ah! What was that?

His quick ear had caught the slight cracking noise made by opening a door which fitted tightly against the doorpost, and which was lo'th to leave its place. It was the door of the baggage-car immediately behind the tender.

Cautiously he crept back over the roof of the car and looked down upon the platform outside the slowly-opening door.

The first thing he saw was a rifle-barrel protruding from the small space between the edge of the door and doorpost.

He laughed inaudibly, and lying at full length on the car-roof, awaited further developments.

In half a minute the rifle-barrel was followed by a man in the uniform of a conductor of the C. B. & Q., who was holding the rifle ready for immediate action. It was a Winchester repeater, and in the hands of a determined man could work sad havoc with an army of tramps such as the conductor supposed had taken possession of the engine of the "Thunderbolt."

Looking carefully around, and seeing no one, the conductor beckoned to those in the car behind him, and was followed by two brakemen and the Express messenger. The latter was about to lock the door after him, but the key

was in the lock on the inside, and, at the suggestion of the conductor, he left it there, because, the four men being each armed with Winchester, they could easily prevent any one getting from the cab to the inside of the car.

They never thought about looking above their heads. Had they done so, the adventure of Mr. Bullard Worth might have had a different outcome.

The conductor and his followers, each with his Winchester at a "ready," climbed swiftly over the tender toward the cab.

No sooner were their backs turned, than Bull let himself down from the roof of the car, and entered, shutting and locking the door behind him.

He did not trouble himself further about the people who were hunting for him upon the engine, but walked through the baggage-room into the other compartment, which was devoted to the uses of the Express company, and whose barred windows and iron-lined doors were strongly suggestive of a perambulatory prison.

Not a soul was to be seen in either compartments, but a long overcoat lying on a big chest caught his attention. It was evidently part of the ordinary costume of the Express messenger. In a twinkling Bull Worth had arrayed himself in the garment, which he was pleased to see reached nearly to his heels. Then, taking the bunch of keys that he had withdrawn from the lock of the other door upon securing it on the inside, he opened the door leading to the other part of the train.

As he did so he found himself face to face with Peachblossom, the Drummer Detective.

CHAPTER IV.

A DEATHLY HUG.

THROUGH two cars passed Bull, until he reached the rear of the second, where, unseen by any of his fellow-passengers, he managed to divest himself of his borrowed overcoat.

He sat quietly in a corner, waiting for developments. He felt now that his chances for getting to Denver without being noticed were pretty good. The whiskers had so changed his appearance that he did not think there was much likelihood of Peachblossom recognizing him now.

He must get rid of the overcoat, however. It would not do for that to be found in his possession. It would at once draw attention to him, and perhaps if the detective were to look very closely at him, he might see that the whiskers were false, and be disposed to make closer inquiries into the identity of Mr. Bullard Worth than would meet with that gentleman's approval. Bull had safely passed the young man at the door of the car, notwithstanding that Peachblossom had bestowed upon him a keen glance as he passed, but he was not entirely satisfied that some suspicion had not entered the detective's mind during the momentary encounter.

"He's ez sharp ez er fresh-ground bowie! cuss him!" muttered Bull.

He looked anxiously toward the door of the car, but there was no sign of the detective.

"I'm right ahind all these hyar people. That's one good job. Ef I c'u'd on'y throw this hyar durned coat out'n ther winder it 'ud be all right," he thought.

Then he realized that such a proceeding would be dangerous, because it would be in full view of all the windows of the cars behind that in which he sat. He bundled up the coat and thrust it under the seat, just as Peachblossom and Red Bill entered the door at the other end of the car, and strolling carelessly toward him, took their places in a seat on the other side of the aisle a little in front of him.

The two men—the drummer and Red Bill—were talking carelessly, and Bullard Worth strained his ears to catch their conversation.

"I don't know how it was, Bill," he heard Peachblossom remark. "There was no one on the engine at all. I think the tramps who threw off the engineer and fireman must have jumped soon afterward. However, things are smooth enough, now. They found an engineer on the train, and they put him in the cab, with one of the brakemen to fire up. It would be no use going back after the others. They were not hurt, and I dare say they will come on to Denver on the next through train. I should like to get my hands on those tramps, though, whoever they were."

"Dare say yer would. Wal, p'raps yer may afore I've done with yer," growled Bull Worth, under his breath.

The train sped along. The conductor had walked quietly through the car at intervals, attending to his duties, and there was nothing revealed by him as to the slight trouble that had occurred upon the engine. Mr. Joseph Grattan, as a well-known detective, had been taken into the conductor's confidence, and Red Bill had of course gone with his chief. But it was not the policy of wise men to agitate passengers over an episode that did not immediately concern them.

Peachblossom and Red Bill had sat patiently in their place, with the aid of men who had a long journey before them, and were resigned to many hours in the car.

Peachblossom might have taken his lieutenant and gone into the "sleeper," but he had his

reasons for remaining in the ordinary coach. Bullard Worth, also sitting still, had kept his eyes fixed upon the two detectives, and had watched their every movement for hours. Once only had he disturbed himself, and that was when the conductor, the first time when he passed through the car, had hesitated a moment as he glanced at him. He did not remember having seen the big black-whiskered man's ticket.

"I got on ther train at ther last stop," explained Bull, gruffly. "I ain't seen yer afore since I been on ther train. I didn't hev time ter buy er ticket. What's ther fare ter Denver?"

The conductor looked down at the speaker suspiciously. He was an old railroad man, and he knew that there were hundreds of tricks resorted to by those who "beat their way."

"I don't see how it was I passed you over," he observed reflectively. "I took up all the other tickets of the passengers from that last station."

"What is ther fare ter Denver?" repeated Bull, as if he did not care to enter into a discussion with the conductor. "What is ther fare?"

The conductor, with official stolidity, took the \$20 bill tendered by Worth, and handing back the correct change, was content to answer the question in that practical way, without troubling himself to say another word to the gruff fellow with the black whiskers.

"But I'll keep my eye on that fellow for the rest of the trip," was the conductor's mental resolution, as he left the car and slammed the door behind him.

Hour after hour passed! The brakeman came through and lighted the lamps, and their feeble glimmer revealed the tired passengers, unable and unwilling to pay for the accommodations of the sleeping-car, curling themselves up in their seats, in the hope of obtaining a few hours of uneasy slumber. Their odd positions as they tried to find some way of converting the narrow seats into full-length beds gave them a grotesque appearance in the dim light, and a casual glance into the car would give the impression that it was nothing more than a traveling hospital, bearing away an army of desperately wounded soldiers.

Peachblossom and Red Bill seemed to be untiring. They sat upright, and if they dozed they did not change their positions materially.

Suddenly every one in the car was startled by a fierce oath uttered in no gentle tones by the gruff black-whiskered stranger in the next seat.

"I've lost it. I've been robbed!" he yelled, in the greatest excitement, as he sprung from his seat and took a few hasty steps along the aisle.

Then he seemed to recollect himself, and sitting down again, he eagerly searched all his pockets, with an expression of the greatest anxiety upon his surly countenance.

"It's gone!" he muttered. "It's gone! I must have dropped it when I wuz crawlin' about thet thar engine or on top of the kyar. Now, what's to be done?"

He sat still in deep reflection. He was, indeed, in trouble. He had lost the chart and note-book that he had stolen from old Matthew Thorne!

The Drummer Detective and Red Bill did not move in the general excitement created by Bullard's sudden yell. If they heard it they did not make any sign.

It was now the dead of night, or, rather the small hours of the morning. Bull Worth was thinking deeply. Could it be possible that he might find the precious package if he was to find means to go over the roof of the baggage car, and, if the package were not there, to even reach the engine. The latter was still in charge of the engineer who had been picked out from among the passengers, and the brakeman, a small, wiry fellow, with a thin neck and short black hair, wiry, like himself, was shoveling on the coal in the most businesslike and industrious fashion, rather enjoying the change from his ordinary work than otherwise, though he considered it incumbent upon his dignity to grumble continuously about the hardship he was suffering at the hands of a tyrannical conductor.

Bull Worth looked cautiously around the car, and particularly at the detective, who, sitting quietly in his seat, with his head dropped forward upon his chest, appeared to be in a doze. Red Bill, nearest to the window, was leaning against the side of the car, and was evidently fast asleep.

"I must walk through this kyar an' ther next, thet's sure," thought Bull, as he arose and drew his lank form up to its full height.

He put his hand upon the hilt of his bowie-knife to satisfy himself that it was ready for immediate use, and then, with studied carelessness, marched along the aisle to the door at the opposite end of the car.

As he passed Peachblossom and Red Bill, both those gentlemen seemed to be in as deep a sleep as any two people in the car. It was reasonable to suppose, from their appearance, that nothing less than a collision or the bursting of the locomotive boiler could awaken them. Yet no sooner had Bullard Worth passed through the doorway and closed the door softly after him than the Drummer Detective, rising from his seat, gave Red Bill a slight shake and walked

along the aisle, followed by his faithful henchman.

"Carefully, Bill, carefully!" whispered Peachblossom. "He must not have any idea that we were not fast asleep. But we must not let him out of our sight again. You understand?"

"I understand."

"Good! You have your weapons ready?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't use them unless it is absolutely necessary. All we have to do is to keep watch on him, and to try and find out what his game is. I do not understand it at present, but he is after some deviltry, and it may be in connection with this job of ours, for all we can tell."

"Yes. With them thar black whiskers on his jowl, too," said Red Bill, with a grin. "He ain't got ther sort o' face and figger to disguise very well."

"Hush! Come on!"

This hurried colloquy took place as the two men stole softly along the aisle. On all sides of them were snoring passengers, save when, here and there, some restless individual moved impatiently, and half-opening his eyes, as the detective and his follower passed, closed them again to try once more for a nap on the rumbling, shaking, swaying train.

The detective, after a keen glance through the glass door to assure himself that the platform outside was unoccupied, opened it quickly, and slipped through.

The cool breeze of night blew across the faces of the two men, and refreshed them after their many hours in the close atmosphere of the car.

A glance through the glass door of the next car revealed the fact that Bullard Worth was just passing out at the other end.

Two minutes later the detective and Red Bill stood on the platform between the first passenger coach and the baggage car, where they had last seen Bull Worth.

"Whar's he gone?" whispered Red Bill, rather awe-stricken by the fact that the platform was empty save for the presence of his companion and himself. "The door uv ther baggage car is locked, and he couldn't hev jumped off ther train, eh?"

"Bill, your brains are pretty good sometimes, but not always. What do you think about his having climbed up instead of jumped down?" observed the Drummer Detective, with a careless smile.

"By Caesar! I guess you're right thar."

"I know I am right," was the drummer's quiet response.

"Wal, now, what air we ter do?"

"I should think our next move is obvious, Bill. We must follow him."

"Oh!"

"I do not like to soil my clothes in crawling over that dirty car-roof, but I do not see any help for it," said Peachblossom, as he straightened his neat Prince Albert and brushed a few specks of imaginary dust from the sleeve. "However, I must get a new suit in Denver if necessary, and I have other clothes in my trunk, too. Come, Bill."

"Come whar?"

"Follow me, and have your knife ready."

"All right, Cap. Go ahead! Though durn me ef I know what all this hyar is about."

"It is not necessary that you should. Only do as I tell you," was the detective's cool reply.

It was evident that the daintily-attired young man had complete control over his rough companion.

In an instant the Drummer had raised himself upon the iron hand-railing of the platform, so that he could, by pulling himself up a little, look over the roof of the baggage-car.

No one was there, and with an agile movement, he had reached the roof. Red Bill, more clumsily, followed him.

Crawling on hands and knees, the detective soon reached the end of the car and looked over.

Hardly had his head shown itself over the edge than two strong hands from below seized him around the neck, and pulled him off the roof, head-first!

CHAPTER V.

THE DETECTIVE'S WILD RIDE.

TAKEN completely by surprise, and without anything to hold by, it was an easy thing to overbalance the young man.

He managed to shout "Bill," but his follower being, as already intimated, slow and clumsy in his movements, was at the other end of the car—too far away to render any assistance.

"Shut yer mouth," growled a voice in the detective's ear—a voice which he recognized, in spite of his excitement, as that of Bullard Worth.

It was very dark, the flash of the headlight of the engine upon the rails beyond, making it still more gloomy behind, by contrast.

The detective was lying on the platform of the baggage-car, with coal-dust from the engine blowing in his face like small needles, and with a strong knee upon his chest, that for the moment rendered him helpless.

The engine roared, and occasionally a red glow struck the hissing steam from the smoke-stack as the fire-box was opened by the brake-

man, temporarily acting as fireman. But, the narrow platform upon which the Drummer lay with that pitiless knee on his chest and that sinewy hand at his throat, was in almost pitchy darkness.

For a second or two Bullard knelt thus, without speech or movement other than a muttered oath, as he secured a stronger grip on the throat of the other.

Then there was an intense struggle, and Peachblossom, struggling to his feet, freed his right arm and tried to get at his knife in its sheath inside his coat.

The desperado divined his purpose and seized the detective's wrist. The latter's attempt to reach his knife was foiled, but, with a quick turn, he grasped at the heavy black beard of Bull Worth and pulled it off, just as a strong light from a bull's-eye lantern over their heads fell full upon the face of the desperado!

"Hold him, Cap!" shouted Red Bill, as he waved his lantern. "It's thet or'nary cuss, Bull Worth, sure ez shootin'. My, we're in luck, eh?"

"Yas, in great luck!" hissed Bull, as, taking full advantage of his position, he forced the Drummer Detective back along the platform until he at last swung over the steps.

"Bill," gurgled Peachblossom, realizing his deadly peril and his helpless situation.

"I'm comin', Cap! Hold on thar a minute!"

He hastily put his lantern down on the car's roof, so that he could climb down, thus shutting off the light from the platform. At the same instant the detective felt Bull's hand searching his inside coat pocket, and then—he fell, head-first, from the platform.

Red Bill jumped from the car roof and grappled in the dark with the desperado. The latter had the advantage in strength and size, and, moreover, was able to distinguish the form of his enemy against the dark sky as he came down.

The struggle was a very short one. Red Bill found himself thrust backward, and grasped the railing only just in time to save himself from falling off. When he recovered his balance Bullard Worth was gone!

In the mean time, what had become of Peachblossom?

As he found himself falling, with the grinding wheels close to his head, threatening to crush him out of all semblance of humanity, he instinctively grasped at anything that might be within reach.

On each side of the steps, partly underneath, were iron supports—round bars—that held the steps secure, and were strong enough to bear the weight of tons. As the detective fell, turning nearly a somersault, he seized the bar on the side toward the rear of the train, and held it with the tenacity of desperation.

It was only with the unthinking clutch of a drowning man that he seized this bar which seemed to have been put in his way by mere good luck. If he could have thought at all in his badly shaken-up state, he would not have had the least hope that it would save him from death. But he held on.

His feet dropped to the track, and bumped over the ties with frightful velocity. His neat shoes were torn and broken to shivers in a few minutes. Still he held on—at first with one hand, then with two.

He collected his thoughts as soon as he found that he might be saved after all.

His first idea was to crawl up on the platform again, but this he found would be impossible while the train was running.

His feet were still bumping over the ties, but, perhaps fortunately for his nerves, he did not know that they were only a few inches in front of the remorseless wheels that, ever chasing, never quite reached their coveted prey. Had he been six inches taller, or been held in such a position that he stretched a little further back, this chapter would end the tale of the Drummer Detective's life.

What had become of Red Bill and the villain who had sent him reeling over the edge of the platform, he did not know—nor, in fact, was he thinking much about them.

An idea struck him. If he could get upon the trucks of the car—that is, the arrangement of wooden beams under which the wheels ran—he could rest with comparative ease until the train stopped. He felt that his strength was giving out under the tremendous tension to which he was being subjected at present. There was plenty of room between the top of the trucks and the bottom of the car, and he knew that tramps were sometimes in the habit of riding hundreds of miles in that way.

"I am not a 'tramp' perhaps, but I am afraid that I look like one now," he thought. "Anyhow, it is better to be a live tramp than a dead gentleman."

Hooking his right arm around the iron bar to which he had been clinging with both hands, he felt about with his left hand for something by means of which he could reach the trucks behind him.

Ha, here was something! A large iron staple through which he could thrust his whole arm, was secured to the bottom of the car, amid a wilderness of nuts, braces, nails, and cross-beams. Baggage-cars must be, of all things,

strong, and the detective knew that every one of these "trimmings," while they might seem to a stranger put there only for ornament or through a mere whim of the builder, served a purpose and were necessary to the general utility of the car.

Bracing himself firmly with his right arm, he put his left through the staple, and tried to raise himself. To his delight, he found that he could thus lift his feet from the ground, and, for the first time since he had been hanging under the car, relieve himself from the painful bumping of his feet against the ties.

He felt with his feet for the truck and after once touching a wheel that sent a whirl through him from head to foot, managed to secure himself upon the truck, with his head toward the platform.

He lay in this position for a minute to get his breath and gathered strength. Then with an almost superhuman effort, he contrived to draw himself up on the truck, all in a heap, but—safe!

"Ah! This is pretty rough riding but it seems like reposing upon a bed of down after my late experience," he muttered. "I wonder how long before we shall make a stop. The night must be pretty well advanced."

It was indeed, for if the detective could have seen the sky from his place under the car, he would have been aware that there were some decided streaks of light above the eastern horizon.

He sat still for a few minutes, thinking over his situation, and wondering, now that he had time, how his lieutenant, Red Bill, had fared with Bullard Worth. Then his mouth opened as he tried to assure himself that something had happened.

"Well, I'll be hanged!" he ejaculated, in a tone partly of relief and partly of disgust.

The train was stopping!

"Have I been taking all this trouble when I might have spared myself? Just my luck! However, I suppose I ought not to grumble. It might have proved worse!"

Even as he spoke the long train came to a rest in a good-sized railroad depot.

"Furnas! Furnas Junction!" he heard some one call out, and he knew that he was half-way across the State of Nebraska, well on his way toward Denver.

"May as well get out of this, I suppose," he thought. "I don't want to ride any further in this private boudoir."

He carefully let himself down from the truck, as well as his stiffened limbs would allow, and, was about to crawl out from between the wheels, when a strong, bad-smelling, oily light was thrust almost into his face, and a voice screeched:

"Howly Moses! Here's the devil himself. Ow! Ow!"

The light was dropped, and an oil-can with a long spout went with it, the individual, who had been holding them dancing back in mortal terror.

"What's ther matter with yer, yer dog-gorned galoot. Hyar! Git, will yer!"

It was Red Bill that spoke, as the detective recognized at once, and the big fellow picking up the still blazing torch, started back with a cry of surprise and delight, as he saw his chief under the car alive and unhurt, even though he was in such a dirty condition that it was hard to believe it was indeed the dainty young Drummer.

"Captain!" he yelled, scarce able to contain himself with joy.

"Yes, Bill; here I am. Don't let them start the train till I get out."

"Not much! It stays hyar for ten minutes anyhow. Guess that thar fellow who was a 'iling the wheels is scart outer his seven senses. Hyar, give me yer hand!"

Peachblossom took the other's proffered paw, and, after a little trouble, managed to extricate himself from this unpleasant and dangerous situation.

The man who had dropped his oil-can in such terror, because he thought the drummer was his Satanic Majesty, here came up and looked curiously at Peachblossom.

"Faith, and ye're a howly show. That's what kims of thryin' ter b'ate yer way through. Ye had better not let the coondoocher git on ter yez, now Oi'm a tellin' yez. Ha, ha, ha!"

Red Bill allowed the man to talk without exhibiting signs of impatience or annoyance, but laughter was more than he could stand.

He advanced threateningly as if he would have annihilated the laughter by his mere weight.

"See hyar, young feller, I don't want no cacklin' at gentlemen. This hyar's my friend, and when yer laugh at him yer laugh at me. D'ye onderstand?"

"Never mind, Bill. He doesn't mean any offense, and I guess I do look rather tough. I am sure I feel so. Where is that fellow, Bullard Worth? You know it was he that threw me off the car, I suppose?"

"Indeed I do, ther skunk. I had a tough pull with him myself, and I'm a fish ef I know what 'come uv him. He very nearly sent me flyin' off ther platform, an' I guess he would ef the con-

ductor hadn't opened the door uv ther kyar at ther right moment an' pulled him off."

"Well?"

"So he jist lit out with thet thar big bony fist uv his an' knocked me back on top uv ther conductor. When we got right side up ag'in he was gone."

"Who? The conductor?"

"No. Bull. An' what's more, I ain't seen nothin' uv him sence. I—"

Red Bill was rambling on, for he liked to talk, and the Drummer was listening in a careless way, when suddenly an expression of consternation passed over the face of the young man that was plainly visible to Red Bill in spite of the soot, oil and dust that begrimed it.

"What's the matter, Cap?"

With an effort the detective repressed his excitement, and said, softly:

"It is gone!"

"What?"

"The chart and note-book that was fastened together in one package inside my coat, in a pocket where I felt sure they would be safe."

"Captain, that knocks this hyar bizness out, doesn't it?" said Red Bill, despairingly.

For a second the dark eyes of the Drummer Detective flashed. Then he coolly answered:

"Bill, that fellow Bullard Worth has the package, and he will go to the ranch to try and find the treasure. But, mark me, Bill, I'll check-mate him!"

"Will you?" muttered a tall, lanky man, who, hidden behind the baggage-car, in the darkness on the other side of the dark track, had listened to every word of the foregoing conversation.

"Not if Bullard Worth knows it."

"All aboard!" shouted the conductor.

Ten minutes later the train was again speeding on its way toward Denver, and the Drummer Detective, in the baggage-car, was taking a bath, preparatory to putting on an entirely fresh outfit of clothing from his well-equipped trunk that stood open by his side.

CHAPTER VI.

WHERE DID BULL WORTH GO?

It was a beautifully bright morning.

The peaks of the Rocky Mountains, snow-capped, as they were, gleamed red in the rays of the rising sun, and the canyons and crevices of the mighty range of rocks peeped forth one by one from their shadows as the day progressed with the marvelous rapidity peculiar to Southern Colorado.

All was bustle in the mining village of Bobson's Corner, some ten miles by stage from the Denver & Rio Grande Railway, and the rough but good-humored miners that stood in front of Bobson's Hotel, or loafed into the bar-room at intervals for a drink, were evidently disposed to enjoy life.

"Say, Bobson, ain't it 'bout time thet thar stage wuz hyar? Seems ter me it's 'bout an hour abind time already, eh?"

The speaker was a man of perhaps sixty years of age. He was in appearance the ideal of an evangelist. His long, white hair was silky in texture and hung in flowing curls like floss upon his shoulders. A white beard, reaching to his chest, added to his venerable appearance, while his mild blue eyes and noble forehead were such as we often see in pictures of saints. His dress was that of an ordinary miner, save that no pistols were to be seen in his belt, and his accent was distinguished by the peculiar intonation naturally acquired by men living within the shadow of the Rockies.

"D'ye hear what I said, Bobson? Whar's that thar coach?"

"How in thunder should I know whar it is?" responded Bobson, a little whipper-snapper of a man, who looked as if he might have been a big fellow once, but had been dried in the sun until he shrank to his present proportions. "I ain't got no string tied ter ther coach. I got 'nough ter do ter run this hyar hotel, 'ithout botherin' my head 'bout no coaches."

Bobson gave this answer in an irritable tone, but he kept his eyes very sharply on the old man while he spoke, and his right hand toyed with the butt of one of his heavy revolvers, as if ready to draw the weapon on the slightest provocation.

It really looked as if he feared some attack on the part of this mild old gentleman with the white hair and whiskers. If he did, the fear was groundless, for the other only stepped upon the stump of a huge cedar that had been chopped down in front of Bobson's Hotel years ago, and, shading his eyes with his hand, looked anxiously down the road and through the gulch by way of which the stage should arrive.

Bobson went into the hotel, muttering to himself, as was his custom, and watching sharply that the miners were not getting the better of the inexperienced boy who had lately come from the East to make his fortune in the silver country, and who, being destitute of experience and money, had naturally dropped into the position of bartender at Bobson's Hotel.

"You air a little too fresh, Zed Bobson—a little too fresh!" said the old man, softly, as he looked after the hotel-keeper with his mild blue eyes. "Mind I don't salt yer down!"

The benevolent expression of the old man's

face was positively angelic, in spite of the threat conveyed in his words, but two or three of the idlers who had noted the episode between Bobson and himself smiled significantly, and one rubicund, jolly-looking miner whispered:

"Now look out fer squalls! Thar's er look on ther old man's figurehead ez sez thet close-reefed tops'ls is ther thing. Whenever I see Mad Sharp so durned sweet I allers know ez thar is breakers ahead."

This sentiment evidently agreed with those of the two men who listened to the last speaker, and there was a portentous nodding of heads by the little group as they strolled up to the side of the old gentleman referred to as Mad Sharp, and joined him in looking down the ravine for the stage coach.

"Ah, hyar it is at last," exclaimed Mad Sharp, with a smile passing over his saintly face. "Hyar's ther coach!"

In an instant everybody about the hotel had gathered on the veranda or in the road in front, looking in the direction where a cloud of dust and the rumbling of wheels told that the Cuchara stage was rounding a curve that would soon bring it within sight of Bobson's Corners.

It was the day after Peachblossom's adventure on the railroad detailed in the last chapter, and one of the first objects discerned when the coach swung into sight was the young drummer, sitting by the side of the driver, faultlessly dressed, as usual, and showing no traces of the stormy time he had had since leaving Chicago.

Immediately behind Peachblossom sat Red Bill, quiet and undisturbed, and only anxious to please his chief in everything he did.

With a dash the coach drew up in front of the veranda, and the driver, throwing down the reins upon the backs of his four smoking horses, followed the detective to the ground and walked vigorously up and down to stretch his limbs after being cramped up for ten miles.

Madison Sharpe had, ere this, opened the coach door, and putting his arms around the neck of a young girl whose sunny curls were very like his own, save for the color, kissed her again and again on her fresh red lips.

"Oh, dad, you'll rumple all my hat! An' you don't want ter do that, nuther, fer I give ten dollars fer it up in Denver. Ain't it a beauty?"

The voice of the girl was as sweet as the ripple of the creek that ran down behind Bobson's Hotel, and her father, Mad Sharp, was evidently aware of the fact.

The two stepped into the hotel, and passing through the hall that ran from back to front, found themselves in a quiet spot, where two horses, saddled, were hitched to a post.

"Ah, Fan, I'm glad ter see yer again," said the girl, as she stroked the nose of a beautiful dapple gray caressingly. "Did yer miss me when I wuz away?"

"You kin bet she did, Marie! I hed an awful sight o' trouble ter keep her quiet sometimes. But, git on her, Marie, an' let's make our way home. I don't keer ter leave ther place alone too long."

"All right, dad; I'm agreeable."

With a spring, the young girl was on the back of her favorite, Fan, and the venerable old gentleman having mounted his own horse, black as night, the two rode around to the front of the hotel.

"Now, gentlemen, I wish you to understand that the great European Novelty Vaudeville Show and Museum will be exhibited this afternoon in a tent a few rods from Bobson's Hotel. It's one of the brightest, most refined exhibitions as you ever see, with everything to please and nothing to offend. The admission will be one dollar, an' if any lady or gentleman ain't satisfied with what he sees and hears, he can get his money refunded by applying at the box office. I wish the progressive citizens of Bobson's Corners to give their opinion of the great European Novelty Vaudeville Show and Museum, because it has been witnessed by the President of the United States, and the highest society of Washington, New York, Boston, Chicago and San Francisco, as well as by Queen Victoria and General Boulanger. They all liked it, and this medal I wear on my bosom was given me by the Prince of Wales in recognition of my efforts to raise the standard of theatrical representations in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland. Remember, the admission fee will be one dollar, and we guarantee you satisfaction."

The speaker was a little man, clean-shaven, with a rather red face and merry, twinkling eyes. A smile seemed to be always lurking about his mouth, and he had a subdued expression suggestive of extreme modesty except when he was lecturing. Then his countenance seemed to sparkle all over, and he gave his hearers the impression that he could talk forever if the breath would only hold out.

"Whar is yer show, shipmate?" asked the miner to whom we have already referred and who had evidently been a sailor at some time in his life.

"Coming right along in two wagons from Cuchara. All the curiosities and actors are with it. I am the manager, and I kim ahead so as to give the citizens warning. That is all."

As he spoke the showman unrolled a canvas sign some six feet square that he had held,

like a scepter while talking and showed a gaudily painted picture of four ladies in short dresses, fencing desperately with very long foils. On the top were the words "Tony Black, manager."

"That's me, gentlemen, Tony Black is my name. I have gained a reputation all over the country for my Punch and Judy and my "Shadowgraphs," both of which I will exhibit this afternoon and evening, with your kind permission."

The little man continued to talk in this strain to the miners from the veranda of the hotel, and it was easy to see, had made his way entirely into their good graces. Any one who can amuse the population of a Colorado mining-town is sure of a welcome.

"Bill," whispered the Drummer Detective, as he stepped away from the group, followed by the wondering gaze of more than one roughly-dressed fellow, for a dude such as Peachblossom appeared to be was rather rare in Bobson's Corners.

"Well," answered Bill.

"Listen to me."

"I'm listening."

"Keep your eye peeled for Bull Worth."

"Bull Worth? Why, yer don't s'pose he's hyar, do yer?"

"Not yet. But he will be. He has my map, I know. I remember that he was fumbling at my coat when we were wrestling in the train. He has an idea of what we are after and I tell you that he will soon be at Bobson's Corners. Watch for him!"

"And when I see him, what then?"

"Tell me, and I shall know what to do."

"I guess you'll see him ez soon ez I shall."

"I guess so, too, but, I want to make sure of not missing him. He's a sharp rascal, and we may have a desperate game to play with him."

Red Bill looked into the face of the detective somewhat in surprise as he listened to these ominous words, but Peachblossom was quietly puffing at his cigar, and there was nothing in the expression of his countenance to give an index to what was passing in his mind.

"Durned ef yer ain't a corker!" whispered Red Bill to himself, softly.

"Exactly. And it is necessary that I should be a—a—corker, whatever that is, if we are to put this job through," observed Peachblossom, quietly.

"Didn't know you heard what I said," declared Red Bill, opening his eyes wider than ever.

"My ears are always open, Bill. That is part of my business. What is that coming up the gulch?"

"The showman's wagons. Don't yer see ther picters on ther front uv 'em?"

Red Bill was right. In a few minutes the two lumbering wagons, with their canvas tops, had drawn up a short distance from the hotel, and Tony Black, bringing his harangue to a sudden close, ran over to see that his property was in good condition.

"Look, Cap; look!" exclaimed Red Bill, excitedly. "Thar he is! Thar he is!"

"I see him," returned Peachblossom, unconcernedly. "Keep behind this door, so that he will not see us until we know what he is going to do."

A tall lanky man, in an ordinary business suit with staring eyes and large yellow teeth, had slipped from the back of the rear wagon, and was giving a greenback to some one evidently as payment for the ride in the vehicle.

The lanky man had a disagreeable habit of rolling his goggle eyes, and he seemed to see everything at once, no matter in which direction he was looking. Whether he had recognized Peachblossom and Red Bill before they stepped back into their concealment could not be told with any certainty. If he had seen them he controlled his countenance so well that it did not express any surprise, joy or chagrin. It was a perfect blank so far as emotion was concerned.

Bullard Worth—for of course it was he—strolled carelessly toward the hotel, and then, instead of going in, as appeared to be his first intention, slunk around the corner.

Peachblossom, with a whisper to Red Bill to follow, walked quickly through the center hallway to the back of the house, and came face to face with Bullard.

For a few seconds the detective and the desperado looked into each other's faces; then Bullard, with a sneer, turned and walked away. He strolled carelessly toward the canyon up which the wagons had just come, and pausing at the foot of the mighty bluff that rose perpendicularly some 4,000 feet, stood looking, still with the same contemptuous sneer distending his wide mouth and showing every one of his yellow teeth at Peachblossom and Red Bill, who had followed him, at about a score of yards distance, all the way from the hotel.

"It's all right now, Cap. We've backed him ag'in' a wall now, and he can't go no further, unless he kin go clean through ther mountain. My, but he's an orn'ary cuss!" observed Bill, fingering the butt of his six-shooter.

It seemed as if the very thing that Red Bill had referred to sarcastically had happened.

While they were looking at Bull Worth he had

actually disappeared from before their very eyes, and it seemed as if he had been swallowed up by the solid wall of rock.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" ejaculated Red Bill. Peachblossom did not say anything, but he darted forward, to try and find the means by which the desperado had got away.

CHAPTER VII.

AN IMPORTANT CONTRACT.

THE detective reached the solid wall of rock before which Worth had stood a moment ago, and a look of mystification clouded his brow.

"Bill, this is one of the funniest things I ever saw," he muttered, half aloud. "The rock appears to be solid."

He passed his hand over the face of the bluff, looked up and looked down. There seemed to be no possible way for any one to get away from the spot on which Bull had stood, unless he ran back toward Bobson's Corners.

Where could the fellow have gone?

Peachblossom was completely nonplused, but he determined that he would penetrate the mystery somehow.

"Bill!"

"Wal?"

"What is your opinion of this?"

"I ain't got none."

"Nonsense! What do you think of it?"

During this colloquy Peachblossom was carefully examining every inch of the rocky wall, passing his hands over it, and watching closely for anything that looked like a secret door, made up to resemble the solid rock. He had seen such things in the course of his experience as a detective. He was talking to Bill mechanically, and hardly thinking what he was saying. He did to depend much upon the intelligence of his follower although he knew that he could depend upon his fidelity.

"What do you think of it, Bill?" he repeated.

"I don't think nothing. W'en a feller like Bull Worth kin make hisself melt through ther Rocky Mountains, I ain't got nothin' 'tall ter say, 'cept thet he must be what I allers half-suspected—ther devil."

Red Bill said this in all seriousness, and he evidently did believe that the slippery villain had some connection with Satanic powers.

"Stranger, how d'ye?" broke in a pleasant voice at this juncture, and the detective turned hastily around.

"How d'ye?" repeated the pleasant voice.

It was that of Mad Sharp, and the benevolent old gentleman, sitting easily upon his coal-black horse, was watching Peachblossom feeling the rock before him.

"Good-morning, sir," answered the detective, politely, as, with a sharp, comprehensive glance that took in every detail of horse and rider, he turned and bowed.

"Any way I kin 'sist yer, sir?" asked Mad. "Yer seem ez if yer might be a stranger in these hyar parts."

"I am. I am traveling for the silk firm of Valeus & Schwab, Chicago, but I came down here from Pueblo just for my own amusement, and to satisfy some curiosity."

"Curiosity?" repeated Mad Sharp, with a keen look.

"Yes. I had heard a great deal about rich finds of silver around Bobson's Corners, and I thought I would do a little prospecting on my own account."

"Wuz thet what yer wuz doin' when you wuz er-feelin' ther rock back thar?"

"Not exactly," laughed the detective. "I did not expect to find silver sticking out of the mountain like raisins in a cake, where I could pull it out with my finger and thumb."

"No? Wal, ef I kin do anything fer yer, let me know. I'm down ter ther hotel pretty nigh every day. So long!"

Without waiting for a reply, Mad Sharp galloped his horse back to where his daughter Marie was sitting quietly upon her dappled gray two or three hundred yards away, and then the two, taking a narrow path up the mountain at the rear of the hotel, disappeared.

"Bill!"

"Yes."

"Did you notice anything peculiar about that old man just now?"

"I thought he wuz er dangerous sort uv man in spite of his white whiskers. He's er man ez I should 'spect ter take ther pocket drop on er man ef he got in er fuss."

[The "pocket drop," it may be explained, is firing from the hip, without even drawing the revolver from its scabbard, the shooter thus getting a second or so of advantage over his antagonist, often with a fatal result to the latter. It can only be done by a dead shot, who has practiced the maneuver steadily for a long time, and is generally considered a mean performance, unworthy of Western chivalry.]

"Did you notice, Bill, that we did not hear his horse's feet when he was coming toward us, though they made a loud rattling as he rode away?"

"By thunder, Cap, you're right! He's er sneak, sure ez you live!" exclaimed Bill, clenching his fists.

"Yes. Now let me tell you something else, Bill."

"Say on."

"He is the man that lives in the ranch near which we are to look for the will and the gold-dust that we have come all the way from Chicago to find," whispered the detective.

Red Bill's eyes seemed ready to start from their sockets in his excitement.

"No?" he gasped.

"Fact! Now, we shall have need of all our caution. Bull Worth has the chart and the note-book, and he will be after the treasure, I am certain. There is no reason why he should not. He has the information he needs in black and white, and we know that he is not the man to let any opportunities slip through his fingers."

"Thet's so."

"So, you see, we have two men to fight instead of one. Madison Sharpe will defend that ranch of his to the last gasp. He knows that the will and gold-dust are somewhere in his neighborhood, and he has been trying for years to find it. Without the clew this would be practically impossible for him; but he will most certainly try and stop any one else from getting at it."

"What are we to do first?"

"Do?" echoed the detective. "Why, we must, first of all, find this fellow, Bull Worth, and get that chart back. We must have it, at any cost."

"How d'ye know he has it?"

"How do I know it? I do know it, and that's enough. Ah! If I had not slipped off that platform last night, I would—"

The detective stamped hard upon the ground as he spoke, in the intensity of his feelings.

"Captain!" shrieked Bill.

Peachblossom had disappeared as suddenly and mysteriously as had Bullard Worth a few minutes before.

The ground had given away beneath him, letting him down into a pit, and the opening had immediately closed over his head.

Red Bill dropped upon his knees and began scratching at the loose stones and gravel like a madman. The ground seemed to be solid rock, with boulders and earth upon it, and for anything that could be detected by Red Bill might never have been disturbed since the sea rolled back from it thousands and thousands of years before.

"Say, Bill!" muttered Red Bill, apostrophizing himself with a dazed expression on his face. "Say, Bill, air you crazy? You ain't lost, yer mind, hev yer? I see him go! Durn it! I see him go."

He fairly shrieked these last words, as, drawing his bowie-knife, he dug at the ground in a perfect frenzy.

For several minutes he dug and scratched and kicked with his heels upon the rocky ground. Then he paused, with the perspiration rolling down his face, and a cold feeling of horror at his heart that could only be the result of superstitious misgivings.

He sat down on the ground, his knife still in his hand, and looked around him. In the distance he could see the showman, Tony Black, bustling about; putting up his tent for the afternoon exhibition, while the idle miners stood around, and were evidently offering suggestions as to the best way of erecting the structure, suggestions which it was just as evident the bustling little showman was treating with the utmost contempt.

Bobson was dodging in and out of his hotel, and the whole scene in the village was animated in the sunlight, forming a marked contrast with the stillness and massive natural grandeur of the rocky giants in the immediate vicinity of Red Bill.

"I dunno what ter do," he thought. "I don't want ter bring them fellers over hyar, 'cause I know ther captain wouldn't want me ter give away ther bizness ez brings us hyar. Thar's one thing. He's able ter take keer uv himself ez long ez he has any show at all. I know what ter do. I'll foller thet thar Mad Sharp, an' his darter, an' when I find him, why I'll hev somethin' ter tell the Cap when I see him ag'in."

It will be noticed that Red Bill had not the slightest doubt but that Peachblossom would be able to get out of any predicament into which he might be drawn. Bill knew that this mysterious disappearance of Peachblossom was in some way the work of Bull Worth, and he had made up his mind that the detective and the desperado would have to fight it out, and that the former would undoubtedly be victorious.

With one last dig for the secret that he knew hid the trap at his feet, Bill turned away and walked toward the tent at which Tony Black and his assistants were at work.

Bill was thinking. This was always a tiresome proceeding for him. His brain had not been developed very carefully in his childhood, and in his manhood he depended more upon muscle than intelligence to gain any end he might have in view.

Now that he was alone, without the keen intellect of the detective to guide him, he found himself like a ship without a rudder, plunging hither and thither upon a sea of uncertainty.

He did not know how far it might be to Mad Sharp's ranch, and he was not at all sure in

which direction it might lie. He had seen the old man and his daughter dash away at the back of the hotel, but he did not know how they might have doubled and wound as soon as they were out of sight.

"I guess I'd better not git er horse," he mused. "Even ef it is er long way, I kin walk it, and I kin sneak up thar quietly, which I couldn't do ef I waz ter go er-tearin' up on horseback. Hallo!"

He stopped suddenly, with an exclamation of utter surprise. Then he walked quickly forward, and seizing Tony Black by the shoulders, swung him around with rough good humor, and hit him a tremendous thwack upon the back.

"Tony!"

"Bill!"

The little showman had just breath enough, after the thump upon his back, to utter this word, which he emitted gaspingly.

"Whar from?" asked Red Bill.

"Don't mention it."

This sentence was short, and was about all that Tony Black could say in his present breathless state.

"Why not?" asked Bill.

"Been everywhere."

"You hev?"

"Everywhere, Bill, and—and—my!—what business! My Punch and Judy and Shadowgraphs are great. In San Francisco we couldn't hold the people. Couldn't get a hall big enough anywhere. It's a great show. The lady fencers is a big card. Then you ought to see my lithographs! Printed in ten colors. One of them is a portrait of myself—"

"In ten colors?" interrupted Red Bill.

"Yes. In ten colors. The printer said he didn't know how he was going to put 'em all in, because he said there wasn't ten colors in a human face. But I was paying for all them colors, and you bet I was going to have 'em. I told him if he couldn't do it any other way, I'd make up in war paint, like an Indian. Ha, ha, ha! Well you bet they are all there, and they can't fool Tony Black. I've been in the show business too long for that."

And Tony Black laughed loudly with such a hearty enjoyment of his own conceit that Red Bill guffawed in concert, in spite of his worry about Peachblossom.

"But, say, Tony, I hev somethin' else ter say ter yer, old pard," said Red Bill when the laughter had died away.

"I'm a-listening," replied the little showman, as he shook his fist at one of his men who was pulling the tent out of shape by the awkward handling of a rope.

"You know Mad Sharp?"

"Should say I *did*! I've been in this section before. Played to \$400 here in one day, two years ago."

"Good! I want yer ter help me git ahead of him," whispered Red Bill, looking cautiously around to see that no one was listening to his words.

"Pretty hard thing to do," was Tony's sententious comment. "But, I'll help you. What is the case you have in hand?"

"I want you to come with me to his ranch. There is dirty work going on, and a partner uv mine—Joe Grattan. You know him, eh?"

The showman nodded.

"Has been roped in by thet durned skunk, Bull Worth, an' I—"

"Bull Worth? What—not the feller that—"

"Yes—that's ther very feller. Can you take me to his ranch to-night, an' stan' by me whatever turns up?"

"I will," answered the little showman, heartily, as he shook the other by the hand. "I will go with you as soon as the show is out to-night, on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you come to the show and see my shadowgraphs. They are simply *immense*!"

"I'll do it. Tony, you're er squar' man."

"Think so?"

"I know it, an' between us, we'll knock old Mad Sharp cl'ar outen ther ground!" said Red Bill, as he followed Tony Black into the tent to see him arrange the interior for the afternoon performance that was to begin in an hour's time.

"Oh, you'll knock old Mad Sharp clear out of ther ground, will yer? Well, we will see. Silas Bobson may have something ter say 'bout thet thar!"

It was the proprietor of Bobson's Hotel that spoke. He had heard the latter part of the conversation between Red Bill and Tony Black, and had just sneaked away in time to escape their observation as they entered the tent.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DETECTIVE FINDS A FRIEND.

WHEN the Drummer Detective dropped out of sight so suddenly he was as much surprised as Red Bill.

For a second he stood quite still, finding himself standing, unhurt, upon a heap of shale and stones. Then, as his senses quickly settled themselves, he tried to look around him. The superstitious fear that for a moment had overcome him, evaporated, and he knew that he had been the victim of some trick.

Above, around, all was darkness.

Stay! What was that feeble glimmer on his right, a long way off? An outlet, surely!

He put forth his hand, but touched nothing. He was not, as he momentarily feared, in a narrow pit. Whatever was the place into which he had fallen, it was certainly capacious enough.

He had heard of natural tunnels discovered by miners in the mountains of Colorado—tunnels that were the result of convulsions of nature many centuries ago, or the work of Indians who had peopled the land long before a white man put his foot upon the shores of the American Continent.

"Something of that sort, no doubt," muttered the detective, finishing his thought aloud. "But how did I get into it, and how is it that the hole through which I fell has closed up again so neatly? It is a puzzle—a puzzle!"

He put his hand over his head, but could not reach the roof of the cavern in which he stood. He had fallen something more than six feet, and his fingers, when he stretched his arm above his head, were within about two inches of the roof. In the pitchy darkness, however, he did not know this, and, for anything he could tell, might have been a foot away.

"It is useless for me to try, I suppose," he thought. "Still, for my own satisfaction, I believe I will see what it looks like overhead."

He lighted a match, and taking a small, folding dark-lantern from an inner pocket, where it lay packed in a space as small as an ordinary watch, lighted it and threw the rays around him. In spite of its diminutive size, the lantern was fitted with such strong lenses that it threw a very powerful, though small disk of light wherever it was directed.

Peachblossom first looked up and saw that the rocky roof was of solid rock, save for a space about three feet square immediately above him. This space was filled by a door apparently of iron that had evidently been arranged by some one with a taste for mechanics and ingenuity enough to carry out his ideas.

How it was fastened he could not determine, for there was neither lock, bolt or bar to be seen.

He cast his light behind him, as well as to either side, and saw that he was at the extreme end of a tunnel, apparently about six feet wide, but extending in one direction for miles, perhaps, although the feeble glimmer before referred to in the extreme distance indicated that there was an opening there by which he might reach the open air.

"Funny," he mused, "very funny! And where is that delightful individual, Bullard Worth? I don't see him, and yet he preceded me to this gay and festive place. Probably gone out the way I shall travel as soon as I have examined this place a little closer."

He cast the rays of his lantern at the roof once more, and sought some means of reaching the trap. If he could open it and get out that way it would be better than going, in the dark, on a journey of exploration that might end anywhere or nowhere.

Ah! The very thing!

His glance had fallen upon an old, roughly-fashioned, but strong ladder, lying at his feet.

"This shows that Bull Worth and I are not the first persons to visit this place. There is no knowing who may be here, or what this tunnel has been used for."

The detective planted the ladder against the wall and climbed up. He felt the trap carefully all over.

"Ah! Here are hinges! Of course! Couldn't open the trap and have it swing back again without them. But how is it fastened, and where is the spring that works the mechanism?"

For ten minutes he examined closely every inch of surface of the trap, but without result. The trap was there, and it was solid. Further than that, he could not discover anything about its character. He knew that on the upper surface it was covered with gravel and stones, so as to hide entirely the fact that it was a trap, but why it was there at all, who put it there, and upon what principle it was constructed, so that a person inadvertently stepping upon it, as he had done, should be dropped into Cimmerian darkness in the bowels of the earth, he could not find out.

"It's no use; I must give it up!" he exclaimed, at last. "But, thank my stars, I see a way out of it. If there is light over yonder, there must be some way of the sun's rays reaching there. If the sun's rays can get in, why should I not get out? But I shall never be satisfied until I find out the secret of this trap. I shall have more time, in future, I hope, when I have found the will and the gold-dust—and Bull Worth! Curse him! Well, well! Old Matthew Thorne's job for me seems likely to spread considerably, and I may have more fun than I anticipated before I get back to Chicago. Poor Red Bill, too!"

The thought of Red Bill standing over his head in a state of blank astonishment struck him in such a ludicrous way that he burst into a peal of spontaneous laughter, as he stood on the ladder, lantern in hand.

"Ha! ha! ha!" he cried.

"Ha! ha! ha!" repeated another voice after a pause of perhaps a second.

The detective started and a cold hand seemed to touch him upon the cheek.

"What a fool I am," he ejaculated. "It was the echo, of course. And as for a cold hand—well, I am as nervous as a girl! Pshaw! Business, Mr. Grattan, business?"

He ran down the ladder and threw his arms out in every direction just to stretch himself and prepare his limbs, in a general way, for work. It was a way he had, and its intimation was that he was determined upon some particular line of action.

"Now, for Bull Worth or Mad Sharp—which-ever I meet first. It makes but little difference," as he felt in his belt under his Prince Albert coat, to make sure that his bowie-knife was ready, and then put his hand to the back of his neck, where snugly tucked inside his coat, between his shoulders, were two six-shooters. It will be remembered by some of our readers, that Peachblossom generally carried pistols in this place, and that on one occasion, at least, the custom had stood him in good stead.

His weapons were all safe, and, with one last glance at the iron trap-door over his head, with the aid of his small bull's-eye lantern, he put the latter in his pocket, and strode resolutely forward toward the glimmer of daylight to be seen in the distance.

For some hundred yards or so he walked over a rocky surface, with occasional loose stones, very much as he might have found in the open air over his head. Still the light toward which he was moving did not seem any nearer.

He coughed once as he walked along, and almost directly another cough like his own resounded through the tunnel. At the same moment a cold blast struck his cheek.

He stopped and laughed softly.

"So much for the echo," he muttered. "It was not Bull Worth that answered me, after all. I thought at first that the fellow was sneaking around here guying me."

The idea amused the detective so much that he kept on laughing under his breath as he moved forward, with his eyes still fixed on the feeble glimmer in the distance.

Suddenly he found himself brought up with a jerk. He had run into a wall of rock!

"What's this?" he exclaimed involuntarily, as he put out his right hand to feel his way.

Then he realized his situation. There was an abrupt turn in the tunnel, and he, walking straight forward, in the darkness, had naturally run against the wall.

The glimmer of light was still as far off as ever, and he knew now that he had hitherto been looking at its reflection in the damp wall that had stopped his further progress in that direction.

He turned toward the left, in accord with the direction of the tunnel and as he walked, very slowly, felt in his pocket for his lantern.

Just as his fingers closed upon his lantern something cold struck one of his feet, and he drew back with a small cry of disgust.

He had stepped into icy-cold water.

"What does this mean?" he exclaimed. "But I'll soon satisfy myself about it."

He turned on the light of his lantern, and cast its thin but powerful shaft of brilliancy in every direction.

Then he nodded his head in the manner of a man who sees that suspicions he had harbored have been definitely proved by circumstances.

"Just what I thought—a river!"

It was indeed. In many of the Western States and Territories through which the mighty range of hills known as the Rocky Mountains takes its way there are rivers that see the light of day only at rare intervals. For many miles they run underground, through the foundations of mountains, under broad plateaux and beneath the roots of gigantic trees, emptying at last into other greater rivers or into the broad Pacific itself.

Peachblossom had come across one of these subterranean rivers, and had actually walked into it before becoming aware of its presence.

"Now, what am I to do?" he mused.

He saw that the water extended the whole width of the tunnel, and that there was nothing on each side save the perpendicular rocks, wet and slimy that reached to the roof, that, in this place, was much higher than at the spot where he had been dropped through the iron trap-door.

The river ran from beneath a huge rock at his right hand, where there was evidently a conduit leading from some pool or other river perhaps a thousand miles away. However this might be, the water filled the whole space of the cavern in which the Drummer Detective stood, and he saw that if he was to go any further toward liberty and Bull Worth he must hit upon some means of floating along the river, unless he meant to swim for it.

The last idea made him shiver. He had already got one of his feet wet, and he knew that the water was anything but pleasant as to temperature.

He turned his lantern about in search—a hopeless search, as he confessed to himself—of something that could be utilized as a raft.

Nothing could he see around him save the wet walls, loose stones, gravel, and—at his feet—the rippling water that ran from beneath the great rock steadily, and, as it seemed to the detective, heartlessly.

"Bull Worth must have found some means of getting out of this place, or he would be here now," repeated Peachblossom. "Perhaps he had a boat. And yet—I am inclined to think that he dropped through against his will, just as I did, and would therefore not have made any provision for getting over this water. It's a queer thing—a queer thing!"

Muttering thus to himself, the detective was still examining every inch of the tunnel between the two walls within a space of a dozen yards from the brink of the river. His lantern threw its light everywhere in turn.

At last an exclamation of delight escaped him.

Then he began to pull at a heavy log of cedar that lay in a recess in the wall, and that had hitherto entirely evaded his notice. He saw now, by the aid of his ever-useful lantern, that there were other logs behind him, and the means of making a raft upon which he could comfortably float down the stream, seemed to be at once within his grasp.

It took considerable strength to drag the first log from its resting-place, but, as we know, there were muscles of steel hidden under the fashionably-cut clothes of the Drummer Detective, and he could make light of tasks that would be too much for men who looked much stronger than he.

He did not stop to consider how these logs had reached such an out-of-the-way spot in the bowels of the earth, though if he had he could easily have accounted for the seeming phenomenon, with a swift-rolling river at his feet that ran from he knew not whence, but that very likely took its rise in the heart of a forest.

The first log was pulled out. Then another, and another.

"Three good-sized pieces of timber. That will do," he muttered.

He was feeling in his pockets for some stout string—string that, while not thick, was made in a particular way with steel wire for some of its strands—when, as he carelessly threw the rays of his lantern upon the recess from which he had dragged the logs, he saw something that made him chuckle with satisfaction. He replaced the string in his pocket, and darted forward.

A canoe, with a paddle, was standing on one end in the recess.

CHAPTER IX.

WHERE THE RIVER LED.

"LUCK always smiles upon the good!" cried the young detective, in the extremity of his joy, as he laid violent hands upon the canoe, and brought it to a horizontal position.

It was a perfect craft of its kind, some eight feet long, and had evidently been built by a boat-builder who understood his business, and had combined strength and lightness in his work. The canoe was carefully finished, cedar throughout, and had a handsome velvet cushion fastened to its one seat in the center. The paddle, which lay along the bottom, was held in place by spring clamps, and the whole turnout seemed to be such as a young lady would be likely to use for pleasure trips on some placid stream in summer afternoons.

"Strange thing to find here, but it is better than a log raft, and I must take the liberty of borrowing it, whoever it may belong to," muttered Peachblossom.

The boat was so light that he took it up in his arms and carried it to the water's edge.

He loosened the paddle and weighed it in his hand in a manner that showed he was familiar with the implement. Then he turned the light of his lantern once around him to get his bearings, and, shutting the slide, put it in his pocket.

"Now for a voyage ending goodness knows where," he said to himself.

He pushed the canoe into the water, and leaping gently into the very middle, without causing the frail craft to rock in the least, took his seat upon the handsome velvet cushion, and, seizing the paddle, sent the canoe spinning over the water in the direction of the feeble light that, like a will-o'-the-wisp, seemed to keep about the same distance from him continually.

Once he bumped against the wall, nearly overturning himself. But he took warning from the mishap, and steered more carefully afterward, keeping himself in the middle of the stream as well as he could judge from the position of the beacon-light for which he was paddling.

Not a sound was to be heard now save the soft "swish" of his paddle as it dipped into the water on either side in regular cadence.

Paddling mechanically, the detective soon fell into a dreamy state, to which all his surroundings conduced.

He thought of the expedition in which he was engaged, wondered what Red Bill was doing, tried to account for his own presence in an underground river, and for Bull Worth's mys-

terious disappearance, and at last, as his ideas came to a focus, wondered what would be the end of his present adventure.

"That chart! If I only had that my work would be simple," he muttered. "If I do not find it I must trust to my memory. But if I can get my clutch upon Bull Worth, I will make him give it up, if I have to kill him."

He paddled along for half a mile or so, and then reached the light that had for so long kept away from him.

"Well, well, this is interesting, but I do not know that I am altogether surprised."

As he spoke the detective rested on his paddle and looked upward.

The light that he had seen was nothing more than the reflection upon the water and the wet sides of the rocky wall of a few rays that stole down from the outer world through a narrow fissure in the mountain over his head.

"No nearer liberty than before, eh? Well, patience, Peachblossom, patience! The river must flow out somewhere. Besides, Bull Worth has evidently found some way of keeping away from me, and if I cannot do anything else, I can follow him."

He took up the paddle again and worked with renewed vigor, still following the winding turns of the river with but few collisions with the walls, in spite of the profound darkness.

Ten minutes later he distinguished another light in the distance, much stronger than that which had resulted in so much disappointment before. He paddled along valiantly, persuaded that at last he had found a way out of his damp prison.

His eyes were fixed upon the point toward which he was working, and he was calculating that in a few minutes he would reach it, when his canoe banged with such violence against some unseen obstruction that the frail craft would assuredly have been overturned had it been occupied by a less skillful boatman than the detective.

As it was, Peachblossom had the greatest difficulty in saving himself from a cold bath, and it was only by balancing himself dexterously with his paddle that he kept the canoe from turning bottom upward.

He recovered himself in an instant, and then he realized that it was not an accident that had so nearly capsized his boat.

A pistol-shot rung out with frightful clamor, echoing and reverberating through the cave as if a volley had been discharged.

The flash showed him the staring eyes and yellow teeth of Bullard Worth within a few feet of his own face.

The detective did not hesitate in his course of action. With his light paddle still in his hand, he sprang forward in the darkness straight toward the spot on which he knew the desperado stood. Whether the result would be his dropping into the river or not he neither knew nor cared. All he wanted was to clutch Bull Worth by the throat.

But he did not drop into the water.

As his hand reached the shoulder of his sneaking foe, his feet rested on the uneven planks of a rough flat-boat, which, while rocking dangerously beneath the weight of the two men, was yet strong enough to bear that of half a dozen people.

The detective had Bull's head in what is known among pugilists as "chancery," so that the desperado was for the time utterly helpless.

For a few seconds the two stood still, each gathering strength for a further struggle. Then, Peachblossom, with a dexterous "back-heel," threw his adversary to the bottom of the boat and held him down.

"Lie still, Mr. Worth! It will do you no good to kick," observed the detective, pleasantly. "I have been after you for some time, and now that I have you I intend to hold you. You may rest assured of that."

"Who the deuce are you?" exclaimed Bull, gaspingly. "What do you mean by this hyar hunting down a 'spectable citizen, eh?"

"Very respectable, no doubt, but I do not care to discuss any questions of character with you. Lie still, I say!"

The last words, uttered with more heat than the detective generally displayed, were the result of a desperate attempt of Worth to release himself from the other's iron grasp.

"Now, Bullard, I want the package that you stole from me on the train when you so nearly pushed me under the wheels."

"I wish I had done it," growled Bull.

"Doubtless! However, you didn't, and there is no use in your regretting it. Where is that package?"

"What package?"

"I'll show you what package, my innocent friend," retorted the Drummer.

He slipped his hand into the coat of the desperado and a cry of joy trembled upon his lips as he pulled out the pocketbook, that he knew at once, by the feel of it, was his own, and which he doubted not contained the precious chart and directions for finding the will and gold dust.

While he had been struggling with Bull Worth the detective had not noticed that the cave was gradually getting lighter. The current of the river had become much stronger and the boat

was drifting rapidly toward the light place for which he had been paddling.

"I'll—I'll—make it hot for you!" hissed Bull, almost choking with rage.

"Certainly. As hot as you like, when I get through with you," answered Peachblossom, mockingly.

The boat was now rushing along faster and faster, as the gloom rapidly resolved itself into light.

"Halloa! Where are we!" exclaimed the Drummer, looking around.

The answer came in the shape of a jolt, as the boat brought up suddenly in a small dock, or slip, cut in the solid rock, and which showed itself to be a landing that ran out from a broad plateau, while overhead the blue sky of a cloudless Colorado day showed that they were at last out of the cavern, and that the underground river had reached its outlet in a large, placid lake.

The Drummer had hardly time to look around when two strong hands seized him by the collar of his neat Prince Albert coat, and, lifting him like a child out of the boat, placed him on his feet on the rocky landing.

Bull Worth jumped up as if to follow him and then, with a rough bow to some one behind the Drummer, stopped.

"What's all this hyar?" asked a voice, in mild tones, as the owner of it stepped in front of Peachblossom and showed him the blue eyes and noble forehead of Mad Sharp!

"Nothing—nothing. We and this hyar gentleman was jister-havin' er little fun, thet's all," stammered Bull Worth.

"How did yer git down thar, in ther cavern? Whar did yer git this hyar boat?" demanded Mad.

"I found it up ther creek a piece, an' I took this hyar gentleman aboard to bring him down ter see yer," answered Bull, with a hardly perceptible sneer.

"An' how did you git down hyar?" continued the old man, addressing the Drummer Detective. "Are you still prospecting for silver? When I left you at Bobson's Corners a few hours ago, I didn't expect ter hev the pleasure of yer company at my ranch this evening."

"Evening?" ejaculated the detective, involuntarily.

"Wal, yes. Yer wouldn't call it mornin', I guess. Would yer?"

The detective looked around him, and saw that the sun was indeed sinking redly beyond the summit of the chain of mountains in the West. He had been longer underground than he had suspected.

With one swift comprehensive glance, he took in the details of the place to which the hidden river had brought him. He saw that he, with Mad Sharp and Bullard Worth, was on an island in the midst of a broad lake that was shut in by mountains on three sides. On the eastern boundary of the lake he saw a rocky road that, running up from the water's edge, wound out of sight behind a mighty bluff, and was the only apparent means of communication with the outer world, besides the rather questionable one by which he had reached Madison Sharpe's retreat.

The old man watched the detective closely as his eyes traveled around, while Bullard Worth, who had suspended hostilities with Peachblossom as soon as he was aware of the presence of Mad Sharp, stood silently by his side.

The island was some acres in extent and on the western side was separated from the mountains by not more than a width of eight feet of water. On the very edge of the island at this point was a house of rough-hewn logs, the interstices filled with a peculiar clay that had hardened to almost the solidity of rock. Neither door nor window was visible from where the detective stood.

"You ask me how I got here?" asked Peachblossom.

"Yes."

"Well, I fell through the earth," answered the detective with a careless laugh.

"All right. I know all 'bout it, but I jist wanted ter hear what you'd say. You ain't ther fu'st man ez has met with an accident of that kind. Howsumever, you don't want ter go back ter Bobson's ter-night, I reckon. It's a pretty long stretch. I don't often hev visitors, but ye'r' welcome ter stay all night, an' p'raps my darter may give us some supper."

The detective looked quickly into the face of the old man, and then, with a graceful wave of his hand, thanked him for his hospitality.

"Oh, yer needn't thank me. I might ha' taken er notion ter shoot yer when I fu'st see yer kickin' round with this hyar feller in my boat. I never know jist what I will do. I'm mighty onsart'in in my temper."

"I'm glad that you took the notion to invite me to supper, instead," returned the detective, smiling.

"Yes, it's er good thing for you, sure ez ye'r born. Hev you two fellers had any fuss? I saw yer kinder crawlin' over each other when ther boat ran into ther slip. Howsumever, I don't car' er cuss whether yer hev or not. You will hev ter behave yerself while you're in my shanty. You onderstand?"

The detective bowed his head in acquiescence, and Bull Worth distended his mouth in a grin that showed every one of his ugly, yellow teeth, as he said:

"Whatever you say, goes with me."

"Good. Then come along ter ther house!"

Thus saying the venerable-appearing Mad Sharp strode ahead, leaving the two men to follow.

Surely, three people more strangely assorted never walked together in an apparently amicable group.

CHAPTER X.

A FEW TRICKS WITH CARDS.

MADISON SHARPE swaggered on, never condescending to turn his head until he reached the corner of the log house.

The detective, brushing the dust from his coat with dainty fingers, and evidently extremely solicitous as to his appearance, followed with the careless, springy step peculiar to him, while Bullard Worth, who had dropped his grin and occasionally scowled malignantly in the direction of Peachblossom, slouched along some yards apart.

"Now, boys, hyar's Mad Sharp's house, an' ye'r welcome. Marie!"

"Yes, dad!" returned a silvery voice from somewhere, evidently inside the ranch.

"Kim an' open the door."

"All right, dad."

The detective was looking curiously at the shanty. Standing at the corner, he could not see any door on the three sides that were visible to him.

The mystery was soon explained.

Something struck his hat and knocked it off. Looking upward, he saw that a ladder, light, but strong, had been let down from the roof, and then the piquant features of Marie Sharpe were seen over the edge of the roof, her golden hair flashing in the sunset as if it contained threads of fire.

"Beg yer pardon, stranger! Hope I didn't hurt yer new hat?" she cried, with a mischievous smile that showed her even white teeth and covered her cheeks and chin with dimples.

"Not at all!" answered the detective, as he picked up his hat and brushed it tenderly with his sleeve.

"My! Ain't he er dude, dad? Whar did yer git him?"

"Shut yer mouth and put thet thar ladder down. You're too fresh," replied Mad, but his words of reproof were uttered in tones that indicated his intense love for his pretty daughter, and the detective knew at once that there was one weak spot in this extraordinary man, with his venerable appearance and rough manner of speech.

Marie obeyed her father and dropped the end of the ladder to the ground, where Mad secured it firmly, and then motioned to the detective to ascend.

Peachblossom obeyed, running up lightly until he reached a small flat space between the top of the wall and the sloping roof, upon which the girl stood, and by the side of which was a small hole leading into an upper room of the house.

"Git in thar," directed Marie, pointing to the hole, as she looked with a little laugh at the spot of dust upon the detective's hat caused by the ladder knocking it from his head.

Peachblossom sprang through the opening upon a table that stood immediately below, and thence to the floor.

He had hardly time to note that the room was very small, windowless, and furnished only with the table and a small cot-bed, when Bull Worth entered by the hole in the sloping roof, and was at once followed by Marie, and last by Madison Sharpe.

The old man pulled up the ladder and laid it along the roof, where it would be invisible from the ground, ere he entered the room. Then he closed the trap in the sloping roof, barred it with an immense wooden beam, and made it doubly secure by turning the key in a steel Yale lock that held in place a stout hasp. The detective saw that it would be a difficult matter for any one to effect an entrance to the shanty by the trap-door. What the old man's reason might be for making his house so much like a fortress he hoped to discover later. At present he could only watch and conjecture.

"Well, gentlemen, we will go down-stairs. Marie, show them the way."

The girl pushed open a door, so low that even she had to stoop to pass through the doorway. The others followed, and found themselves in a larger room than that they had left. It was a bedroom, but was furnished rather better than the other. It had a full-sized bedstead and bed, and there were a looking-glass against the wall, a wardrobe, a table and two wooden chairs. Leaning against the wall at the head of the bed, where the occupant would have it within easy reach was a Winchester repeating rifle, while on the bedpost hung a pair of huge Mexican spurs. In a corner of the room leaned another Winchester.

"Quite an arsenal," observed the Drummer Detective, involuntarily.

"Yes—quite an arsenal," acquiesced Madison, with a meaning smile. "And Marie can split a

two-bit piece at a thousand yards ez well ez I kin myself. That's ther kind uv gal she is."

"Oh!"

The detective uttered this interjection quietly, but whether he was surprised, pleased, shocked or only amused, none of his three companions could exactly tell. His tones contained a suggestion of all four emotions, with nothing positive of any of them.

Marie, her eyes dancing with fun, now pushed the bedstead aside, disclosing a trap with an iron ring. This she pulled up, and the detective saw something that gave him unfeigned pleasure.

It was a table, spread with a snowy tablecloth and set with the materials for a good meal. He had not eaten anything since his breakfast, and he had passed through adventures enough to sharpen to a keen edge his at all times healthy appetite.

Marie stepped upon a ladder that leaned against the opening and fluttered down to the dining room like a bird with golden hair and white teeth, if such a simile is permissible.

"Git down thar, stranger. By ther way, what is yer name? Yer told me yer wuz from Chicago, traveling fer ther lace firm of Valeus & Schwab, but yer didn't say what yer name wuz."

"Joe Grattan," answered the detective, as he thought what an excellent memory this venerable old man possessed, and wondered how he had managed to retain so accurately the description the detective had given of himself some hours before.

Bullard Worth, with an elaborate air of not noticing the conversation between Peachblossom and Madison Sharpe, was listening attentively to every word that passed, but did not hazard any remarks.

"Sit down, gentlemen. Make yerselves at home," said Mad Sharp, a few moments later, as Peachblossom and Bull Worth sat down facing each other at the table, the host taking the head.

Marie busied herself about the stove, where a steaming coffee-pot sent forth an aroma most grateful to the hungry detective.

Ham and eggs, corn bread, good butter, and coffee made fare not to be despised, and soon all four were deep into their supper, Marie plying as good a knife and fork as any of her companions, who vied with each other in their havoc upon the provisions.

The detective ate heartily because he was hungry, and because he thought that he should probably require all his strength before he was much older. Bull Worth had the peculiar constitution of men of his build which allowed him to dispose of a tremendous meal at any time and under any circumstances. He ate like a machine, and enjoyed his food about as much as if he really were a machine. Mad Sharp always ate a big supper on principle, because he believed it did him good, and because he appreciated his daughter's skill as a cook, while Marie enjoyed her meal because her digestion was good, and she had not taken very much dinner.

Thus all four had good reasons for making a hearty meal, and the result was a rapid disappearance of everything eatable and drinkable upon the table.

"Hev yer had any luck in lookin' fer silver, so fur?" asked Mad Sharp, as, the sharper pangs of hunger having been appeased, he leaned back in his chair, and toyed with a piece of bread upon the table.

"Not very much, but I expect to strike something rich before I leave Bobson's Corners," answered the Drummer, quietly.

The old man shot a keen glance at the young man, as if he suspected the speech veiled some hidden meaning, but Peachblossom's innocent absorption in the contents of his plate disarmed him, and he was content to believe that the Drummer meant only what he said.

"Are you lookin' fer silver, too?" asked Mad, addressing Bull Worth.

"I'm lookin' fer anything ez I kin find, that's all," gruffly replied Bull.

"Wal, wal. I don't want ter pry inter yer bizness, gents. S'pose we hev er game uv eucher."

The detective and Bull Worth acquiesced, and Marie cleared away the supper things, and put a deck of new cards on the table.

"What'll we play for?" asked the old man, shuffling the cards with the dexterity of an old player.

"I never gamble," remarked the detective, calmly.

"Yer don't, eh? Why not? 'Fraid uv losing yer money? Or don't yer know how to handle keards?" asked Mad Sharp, with a grin.

"I am not afraid of losing my money, but I made a resolution some years ago never to gamble again."

"Oh, yer did, eh?"

"I had my reasons, but I am not disposed to tell what they are. That is my business."

"Durned ef I don't admire his grit," was Mad Sharp's mental observation.

Bull Worth did not enter into the discussion, but he wondered what would be the outcome of it for he knew that this evangelical-looking old man had a rather short temper and was handy with his revolver on occasion.

"As for my not knowing how to handle cards, I can assure you that I have played a good deal in the course of my life. Will you let me look at that pack?"

Without a word Mad handed the cards, that he had been carelessly shuffling, to the detective.

Peachblossom took the cards and giving them a toss, made the whole fifty-two describe a wide semicircle in the air, every card being separated from the rest, until the whole pack dropped squarely into his other hand.

The feat was done so neatly that all three of the spectators—Mad Sharp, Bull Worth and Marie—burst into an expression of admiration in concert.

The detective smiled as he made the cards run like a long snake up his arm, around his neck and back into either hand, as he chose.

"Say, youngster, you're er reg'lar wizard with 'em. Whar did yer pick all that up?" exclaimed old Sharpe, in an ecstasy of admiration.

"Oh, I have been on the road for years, and we drummers learn these little things to pass away dull hours on trains and in country hotels. Let me show you a few more."

The detective for the next half hour showed Mad Sharp and Bull Worth more tricks than they had ever conceived possible with cards. He seemed to be blest with the power of seeing through opaque matter, and to know the back of every card as well as the front. He even turned his back while the pack was manipulated, and then told exactly where certain cards could be found.

"Young man, you're er dandy. I'd like you to stay hyar a week or two, so ez I mought p'raps l'arn er few of these hyar things. Durned ef I ever see keards do ez much fer any other man ez they'll do fer you. An' yet yer don't gamble! I think yer ought ter. Why, you could make er fortune with such slick fingers fer dealin', and shufflin' ez you hev."

"I wouldn't want to play with him, dad. Would you?" put in Marie, who had been intensely interested in the feats of the Drummer Detective.

"Gals should be seen an' not heard," snapped Mad. He was a little bit chagrined to find that this careless young man who would not gamble, was yet such an expert in the manipulation of cards.

"I ain't thet kind uv gal, though, dad, an' I must say them slim fingers uv his look more like a woman's than a man's. Guess they were made for ornament more than fer use, warn't they, stranger?" asked the girl, with the pertness natural to untrained youth and beauty.

"Yes, I shouldn't think thar's very much strength in 'em myself," agreed Mad.

"No? Think not?" smiled the detective.

"Have you another deck of cards?"

"Got twenty decks over thar in ther closet. I allers keeps plenty uv them on hand," answered Sharpe.

"Good. Then you will not mind my destroyin' this one?"

"No. Go ahead."

"Thanks."

The Drummer took the pack in his hand again. The cards were of stout material, of regulation thickness.

"What are yer goin' ter do?" asked Marie, as she watched with the keenest interest every movement of the slim white fingers that were gripping the pack of cards firmly.

"This," answered the Drummer.

With a swift twist of his fingers, he had torn the pack of cards in two about as clean as if they had been cut with a knife.

"Well done, youngster," cried Mad.

The Drummer made no reply, but taking one of the halves of the pack divided it again into quarters.

The feat was one that but few men can accomplish, and was dependent solely upon the strength of the fingers.

The three spectators of the detective's performances were still looking wonderingly at the scraps into which they had been reduced by his deceptive white slim fingers, when two shots rung out in the evening stillness outside the house.

At the same instant the rattling of horses' hoofs and an impatient neigh sounded seemingly directly under the table at which they were sitting.

CHAPTER XI.

A BRAVE LITTLE WOMAN.

TONY BLACK'S Great European Novelty Vaudeville Show and Museum was a tremendous success at Bobson's Corners. Both afternoon and evening performances were well attended, and Tony himself was in the seventh heaven of satisfaction.

His "Shadowgraphs," which was his own title for a drama performed by characters cut out of cardboard and shown on a white sheet with a light behind, proved a great card, and the miners were loud in their demonstrations of approval, particularly when the shadows showed a bar-room quarrel, and one man shot another with a pistol that was discharged with a loud report, and actually smoked at the muzzle.

Tony Black was an ingenious fellow, and knew

how to introduce realism even into a shadow show.

He took Red Bill to the back of the white screen during the performance and allowed him to see how his effects were produced. It was entertaining to note how suddenly Tony could change his voice from the low conversational tones in which he addressed his companion to the loud utterances in which he carried on the supposed dialogue between the characters he was exhibiting on the screen.

Bill had never been admitted to the inner mysteries of a theater before, and the experience was an interesting one to him, even though the theater was nothing more than a tent in a Colorado mining-village.

At last the "Shadowgraphs" were concluded, and Tony Black stepped in front of the screen and announced:

"This, ladies and gentlemen, concludes the entertainment. I thank you for your kind attention, and wish you all good-night."

The audience filed out of the tent, well satisfied with what they had seen, and Tony superintended the covering up of the inanimate curiosities, and saw that all his loose property, wardrobe, etc., were secured in the large, iron-bound trunks that were ranged in an orderly row at the back of the stage.

"Now, Bill, I'm with you," announced Tony, at last, as he stood at the doorway of his tent, which was lighted by the rays of a single lantern hung from the center-pole.

"All right, Tony. You know the way to the ranch, I suppose?"

"Yes, I know the way; but, let me tell you, it is no easy thing to get to it."

"Why not?"

"You'll see." With these oracular words Tony went to a corner of the tent, and, after some rummaging, brought forth a Colt's six-shooter, which, with its scabbard, he fastened around his waist, under his coat, and two Winchester rifles. One of the latter he handed to Red Bill, keeping the other for himself.

"Expect we may hev trouble, eh, Tony?"

"More than likely." The little man spoke coolly, but with the evident conviction that there were lively times ahead of them.

Cartridge-belts were next brought forth, and then Tony and Red Bill, fully equipped for anything that might come in their way, walked out into the night.

They were hardly outside the tent, however, when a shrill female voice cried:

"Tony!" The little showman shrugged his shoulders in dismay, and shaking his head at Red Bill, answered:

"Well?"

"Where are you going?" cried the female voice.

"Not very far."

"How far?"

"Just down the road a piece."

"Just down the road a piece!" repeated the female voice, mockingly. "Yes, I know what your going down the road a piece means. Well, now. Ef you go out, I am going with you."

A young woman, about the same size as Tony, with flashing black eyes, dark hair, in ringlets over her white forehead, and a pretty piquant face, here ran out of the tent-opening and, seizing Mr. Black by the shoulders, gave him a hearty shaking.

"What is the matter, my dear? You will jar all the teeth out of my head. Quit, will you?" expostulated Tony, as the little woman jerked him backward and forward with all her strength.

"Yes, I will quit when I am through. You're the meanest man I ever saw, Antonio Black, and I'll get a divorce as soon as we step into Chicago. Mark that! You neglect me all the time."

Here tears came to the relief of the speaker, and she fell sobbing into Tony's arms.

The showman had had experience with his wife, and he did not suffer himself to be thrown off his guard by her tears. He was holding himself in readiness for another outburst.

Sure enough, when Mrs. Black sobbed for a minute or two, she suddenly sprang up and aimed a blow at Tony's cheek.

He was on the alert, however, and dodged, much to the disgust of his fiery little spouse.

"Now, 'Melia, what's the use of carrying on this way? I ain't a-doing any harm. My friend, here, Mr. Welch, wants me to go out with him for an hour to do some business and—"

"Business? What business can you have to do at 11 o'clock at night around Bobson's Corners, except to go drinking and boozing in the tavern? No, Antonio Black, you can't fool me with your talk about business."

Red Bill had been getting more and more impatient during this connubial controversy. He now broke in with:

"Say, Tony, ain't we ever going to start? I don't care about waiting any longer, an' ef yer wife won't let yer go, I must try an' find ther place by myself."

Tony looked in despair from one to the other.

He wanted to go at once with Bill, but he was afraid to disobey his wife, especially when she was in her present temper.

A bright thought struck him. He leaned over the little woman with the flashing black eyes and dark hair, and whispered a few words in her ear.

She started back in surprise, her anger melting away as if by magic.

"What?" she ejaculated. "Is that the truth?"

"Yes."

"And he didn't have time to come into the tent and speak to me."

"Well, he didn't know that he wouldn't be here in the afternoon," said Tony.

"And you think he has been roped in by old Mad Sharp?"

"Sure ez shooting, madam," put in Red Bill. "I seen him go through the earth right after that thar galoot, Bull Worth, an' I feel it in my bones thet Mad Sharp had something ter do with it."

"Of course he did," agreed the little woman. Then, turning to Tony, she added: "Now, you, Tony Black, you go along and help Joe Grattan out of his scrape, an' ef you want any more help I'll go, too."

"We shall be all right, Bill and me, without any one else. You go in, 'Melia, and keep quiet. We'll be back as soon as we get through."

"You are not going to walk there, are you?"

"No. I have the horses already saddled, back of the wagons. I know my business," answered Tony.

He took the little woman in his arms and gave her a hearty kiss. Then, waving his hand to her, he walked swiftly away in the moonlight, followed closely by Red Bill.

They walked to the back of the wagons, where, as Mr. Black had stated, they found two horses ready for use.

"Take that roan, Bill," said Tony. "He's been used in the ring, and he may stand up straight on his hind feet once in a while, but you will soon get used to that. It is a way he has, the result of his early training in the circus."

Bill did not answer, but springing into the saddle, soon made the roan understand that his rider was one who understood the management of horses, and was accustomed to having his own way with them.

Tony mounted a piebald, and the two men rode quietly away.

They passed very close to Bobson's Hotel, but no one was outside to see them, though there was plenty of noise and bustle within.

"Wonder whether Bobson is making much money. Pretty slick fellow that. Would have made a good showman," observed Tony, as he and his companion struck into a narrow pass in the mountain immediately at the back of the hotel.

They found the path level for a little way, but soon it began to ascend, and the horses toiled painfully over the loose stones and stumps of trees that came in their way at frequent intervals.

"This ther way ter ther ranch, Tony?" asked Bill, more for the sake of saying something than to gain information. He knew that if it were not the right way Tony would not be taking him.

"Yes. This is right. Look out!"

They had reached the edge of a deep rift that lay right across their path. It was not more than six feet in width, but how deep it might be they could not tell. They could only suppose, judging by the ascent they had made, that it was some thousands of feet.

"Halloa! What are we going to do now?" asked Red Bill.

"Put your horse to it. The roan will take you over as easily as lying down."

Red Bill did not hesitate. He rode back a few yards, and then dashed straight for the chasm. The roan cleared it with a full length to spare.

Hardly had Red Bill crossed before he found Tony Black and his piebald by his side.

"How much further, Tony?"

"Not so very far. The old man does not depend so much upon the distance as he does upon the trouble it is to get at him."

"Oh."

The path now lay along the side of the mountain, through a thick forest of pine, that obscured the moonlight and made the place indescribably gloomy. Then it began to descend, until at last another rift like that they had already passed, only a great deal wider, stopped their further progress.

"Another jump, Tony?" asked Red Bill, coolly.

"Yes; the roan will do it."

"All right. Whatever you say."

Without hesitation, Bill spurred his horse for the jump. It was not done quite so clean as the former one, the roan scrambling for a foothold on the opposite side, and causing his rider to doubt for an instant, whether he would be dashed to pieces in the fearful darkness below or not. The roan recovered himself, however, and was soon galloping down the hill, with Tony on his piebald at his side.

"Look out, Bill," suddenly exclaimed Tony, reining up behind a clump of cedars. "Just in around the bend there we shall be in sight of the house. We had better get off and do the rest of this business on foot."

"What is the next move?"

"To look around, and see if there are any signs of Joe Grattan. If not, we had better try to get over to the ranch."

"But Joe—or Peachblossom—may be still in the cave, on that river you tell me about."

"Not much. He has had time to drift down there twice over. You can't fool me on that. I have been through there once, with Mad Sharp himself, though he never let me learn the secret of the trap that let us down," said Tony.

He walked cautiously forward from the clump of cedars after the two had dismounted and hitched their horses to a tree. The moon had sunk now, and it was very dark.

A few steps brought them to a corner of the bluff, and they found themselves in the road that led directly to the edge of the lake, and which has already been referred to in these pages.

A single light across the lake indicated the position of Mad Sharp's shanty. It was only a feeble glimmer, and apparently it shone through a crack in the logs, where the hard clay had not quite filled the space.

"We must get to the house," whispered Tony.

"Can you swim?"

"Yes."

"Then you must try and hold your guns out of the water and swim across with me to the island. It is not more than five hundred yards."

"A pretty good swim with one hand, and carrying a Winchester and revolver out of the water. Don't believe we can do it," said Red Bill.

"Yes, we can," answered Tony, decidedly. "We must get Peachblossom out of his scrape, and there is no other way of doing it, that I know of."

The little man was full of pluck, and he had taken charge of the expedition by sheer force of will.

"Hallo! Hyar's er boat!" exclaimed Red Bill, as his foot struck against something lying at the water's edge.

It was the light canoe in which Peachblossom had made his voyage along the underground river, and which had drifted down to its present resting-place.

It was without a paddle, but Tony did not mind that. He was overjoyed at the discovery of the boat and was quite content to navigate it across the lake to the island with his hands.

Under his directions, Red Bill shoved the canoe off the bank and held it while Tony took his seat at one end leaving the other for his companion.

Tony was stooping over to paddle with a piece of bark when a heavy blow was struck at him by some unseen enemy, but missed him. The weapon—the butt of a heavy Winchester rifle—came down upon the gunwale of the slight canoe and literally crushed it in twain.

Red Bill, up to his waist in water, grappled with a gigantic individual who had thrown himself upon him, while Tony found himself locked in the embrace of a wiry fellow whom he knew at once even in the darkness, to be none other than Zed Bobson, proprietor of Bobson's Hotel at Bobson's Corners!

For a minute Red Bill and Tony each struggled with his antagonist without result. Then Tony managed to get Bobson on his back, as he gasped:

"What a fool you are, Zed Bobson! What are you doing? Don't you know who I am—Tony Black?"

"Yes, I know yer, Tony, an', what's more, the old man knows yer too. I think you've give yer last show," answered Zed, as he tried to escape from Mr. Black's embrace.

"You hev come ter ther wrong place, my amiable friend," said the big man who was holding Red Bill at arm's length and shaking him as if he were a kitten. "When a man comes ter Mad Sharp's place in ther middle uv ther night 'ithout bein' invited he's li'ble ter hev er hot reception. D'ye see?"

"You are Mad Sharp, eh?" asked Bill.

"I am. You've heerd uv me, I suppose?" asked the old man sweetly. And, although it was too dark for Red Bill to distinguish his features, he had not the least doubt that an angelic smile twinkled in the mild blue eyes of the terrible, mysterious creature known all through Southern Colorado as Mad Sharpe.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Bill.

"Whatever you are goin' ter do, you'd better do it right away," broke in Zed Bobson, "or this little whelp will choke me. He's er tightening his grip all ther time."

"You air too fresh, Zed, ez I've remarked afore," was the only answer to this appeal vouchsafed by Madison Sharp.

The old man, whose strength seemed to be superhuman, put one arm around Red Bill, holding him utterly helpless, and lifted him, to carry him along the shore of the lake.

What he was going to do with him Red Bill did not have an opportunity of finding out, for

he had not taken more than two steps when the butt of a rifle descended with tremendous force upon the head of Mad Sharp, stretching him senseless at Red Bill's feet.

Then a shrill female voice rung out:

"You, Tony Black, is *this* the way you help your friends out of scrapes? If I was not to be always watching you, you would not know enough to come in out of the rain. I'm ashamed of you, that's what I am! To make your poor wife come out to a wild place like this and knock down old men. It's disgraceful, that's what it is, and I'll get a divorce as soon as we get back to Chicago. I will, as sure as my name is—"

"Amelia!" exclaimed Tony, who had left Bobson to his own devices at the first sound of the female voice, and was now standing in front of her, with his arms opened wide.

"Yes, Amelia Black! And it's a shame!" wailed that heroic little woman, as she fell sobbing into her husband's embrace.

CHAPTER XII.

BULL WORTH IN DIFFICULTIES.

WHEN the shots and the stamping and neighing of horses disturbed the Drummer's exhibition of his skill with cards, all four occupants of the room started to their feet.

"Go and quiet the horses, Marie. We do not want them," commanded the old man, as he looked straight into the face of the detective, apparently to note what effect the disturbance had upon him.

Peachblossom, however, had quietly dropped back into his chair, and it would have been as easy to read the thoughts of the Sphinx as of the Drummer Detective.

The girl went through a doorway leading to an adjoining room, carefully closing the door after her, and the next minute her voice could be heard below the dining-room, talking soothingly to the horses, addressing Fan by name, and scolding and coaxing her as if the animal possessed human intelligence.

"Now, gentlemen, I hev some bizness ter tend ter, and I'll hev ter ask yer ter go up ter yer bedrooms. Yer see, thar air certain things 'bout my house ez I don't keer to let any one know, so you'll excuse me sending yer away."

The old man made these remarks in his usual mild tones, but it was evident that he meant to be obeyed without question, as he pointed to the ladder for the detective to ascend first.

Peachblossom, with a smile upon his handsome face, ran lightly up the ladder.

As he did so his quick ears caught the words, in Mad Sharp's voice: "Watch him close, Bull, and if you see anything crooked about him, why, just rub him out. You understand?"

"Yes," answered Bull, gruffly, as he put his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder, and began to ascend.

"Oh, then Mad Sharp and Bull Worth are not quite strangers? It is as I expected. I must be on my guard if I am to get out of this," muttered the detective, as he stepped away from the hole through which Bull would come, and pretended to be examining the garniture of the room.

Mad Sharp came up close upon the heels of Worth, and then led the latter into the other room, by which, it will be remembered, entrance was effected from the outside by way of a hole in the roof.

"Good-night, Bull," he said, as he lighted a candle upon the table, and came back to where the detective was standing near the opening leading to the dining-room, and from which a stream of light from a powerful coal-oil lamp ascended and made visible the articles in the upper apartment. It is hardly necessary to say that, as there were no windows in the house, Mad Sharp kept it well supplied with artificial light when he was at home.

Marie had now returned to the dining-room, and her father, looking down, directed her to give him another lamp for the use of Peachblossom.

All these proceedings occupied less time than it takes to tell of them, and in a twinkling the girl had handed up a lamp, which her father placed upon the detective's table, and then going down the ladder, shut the trap-door and fastened it below, as Peachblossom could tell by the sound of shooting bolts and spring locks.

As soon as he was alone the detective took the liberty of turning out his lamp and leaving himself in total darkness.

"I'll block your little game of watching me, at all events, Mr. Bull Worth!" he muttered. "As to whether I am caught like a rat in a trap, or whether my being accidentally brought to the very place for which I was steering will be for good or ill, I can not tell just yet. I wish I had Red Bill with me. The blundering fellow is not afraid of anything, and since I saved him from the attentions of a lynching party in Slippery Elm some years ago, he would go through fire and water for me. However, it is no good wishing. Bill is a good fighter, but he hasn't much brains, and he would never have the gumption to trace me to this place by himself. Ha! What's that?"

He had heard a slight crack in the direction where he knew the door leading to the next room to be, and a draught of fresh air swept

across his cheek, telling him that the door had been opened cautiously by his neighbor, Bull Worth.

From the feel of the air, he suspected that the trap leading to the top of the house was open, too, but if it was, the darkness was so intense that he could not prove it to himself by ocular demonstration.

What was the object of Bull in opening the door he did not know. It was evident an understanding existed between the desperado and Mad Sharp, and that the latter meant to dispose of him (Peachblossom) in some way to suit himself, regardless of the wishes of Bull.

Could it be possible that the latter meant to take the matter into his own hands, and try to kill the detective to cover up the crimes he had committed, in trying to murder him, and stealing the chart and note-book which, fortunately, Peachblossom had since recovered?

The detective could not answer this question, but he was prepared to frustrate such a plan on the part of Bull Worth, if it really existed. In a personal struggle, the dainty young Drummer had already proved that he was more than a match for the tall, ungainly Worth, and Peachblossom had no fear of his foe so long as the latter could not take him by surprise.

Peachblossom did not know whether Bull had entrapped him into the cavern that he had entered so suddenly and unexpectedly by dropping through the ground while actually talking to Red Bill, but he did not think so, because Bull was evidently taken by surprise when he aimed his vicious blow at the detective in the canoe, and afterward engaged in the struggle that was ended by Mad Sharp taking a hand in.

The detective's active mind allowed all these thoughts to pass through it like a flash, as he dropped upon his hands and knees in a corner near the door and waited for the next move of his sneaking neighbor.

The cool air became more noticeable as Bull opened the door wider, and Peachblossom felt certain that the outer trap had been removed, either by Bull Worth or Mad Sharp.

A sound of heavy but repressed breathing now warned the detective that Bull had entered the room and was walking cautiously along near the wall, and would probably fall over him unless he changed his course.

"I hope he won't," thought Peachblossom, "because I should like to find out what he is after before I go for him. If he falls over me I shall have to lay him out forthwith, I suppose."

The Drummer Detective indulged in a silent laugh as he made these mental observations. There was a certain humor in the situation that would have caused him to guffaw outright had he not long since trained himself to habits of extreme caution, especially when engaged in business.

The situation was rather trying for the detective in spite of its comical aspect. At any moment Bull Worth must discover him, and in the dark it was not safe to predict that either of the combatants would get the best of a fracas.

Bull was now immediately over the detective, and it seemed that nothing but a miracle could prevent a collision.

The heavy breathing of the desperado was now more plainly audible than ever, as he stood still as if to collect his thoughts for his next move.

"The sneaking rascal!" thought Peachblossom. "He wants to get me at a disadvantage if possible. He would not dare to meet me in an open fight."

A scratching sound told the detective that Bull was trying to light a match. Evidently the match was damp, for after two or three scratches, the detective heard the faintest sound of impatience from the intruder, followed by the barely audible rattle as the match fell upon the bare boards of the floor.

Another scratch and another, with the rattle of a second match upon the floor.

Bull Worth seemed to be afflicted with matches that were no good, and, indeed, considering that he had been in the damp cavern on the underground river for some hours, it was no wonder that the matches in his pocket were not as serviceable as he could have wished.

"I do not know why I should wait here until he does get a light," thought Peachblossom. "I have the chart and note-book safe in my pocket, and what should I gain by a racket with him that would perhaps bring three or four blackguards to his assistance? Those two shots were evidently signals, and there may be a dozen fellows like Bull Worth around the house now, for all that I can tell."

The cogitations of the detective were the result of a common-sense view of his surroundings. The character of Mad Sharp was pretty well known to him, and though he did not know exactly by what means the old man had acquired wealth, currently supposed to be fabulous, he had a suspicion that he was determined to either verify or refute before he left the neighborhood of Bobson's Corners.

What the two shots meant he could not tell exactly, but he knew that some one must have fired them, and he saw that Mad Sharp understood their purport at once.

Every aspect of the case was such as to induce him to avoid trouble with Bull Worth at present. His best move would be to get out of the room at once if possible.

Bull was scratch—scratching at his damp matches, making more and more noise as he did so, evidently forgetting, in his impatience that his presence should not be known to the detective.

Peachblossom laughed to himself as he noticed the lack of caution. Then he sidled along by the wall, almost brushing against Bull as he passed him, until he reached the open doorway.

To slip through and noiselessly fasten the door was the work of an instant.

He had noticed before that there were bolts on either side, so that the door could be secured outside or inside, as might be desired. He had seen, also, that the bolts and sockets were covered with india-rubber, so that there would be no sound when they were fastened.

Scarcely was the door shut and secured than Bull Worth managed to light a match that was a little dryer than the others.

With his back firmly against the wall and a revolver in his right hand, the desperado held the match up till the light of its flame should reveal to him the position of the detective.

One rapid glance around the room, and then he turned and tugged at the door through which he could faintly distinguish the sounds of some one moving.

"Caesar! When the old man finds that I have let that fellow get out he will make it so hot for me that I shall wish I had broken my precious neck when I fell down that thar hole over thar."

There was no doubt that Bull Worth was frightened. His dread of the mysterious proprietor of the shanty on the island could be seen in the convulsive rolling of his goggle eyes and the chattering of his yellow teeth, while his muttered exclamations as he hastily examined every inch of the room were the effect that he would have given a thousand dollars rather than have allowed Peachblossom to escape.

"He will get out, of course," he hissed, as he ground his teeth. "I must block that game, somehow."

He went to the trap that led below, and tugged at it with all his might, but of course ineffectually. Mad Sharp had secured it on the underside to keep the detective a prisoner, and it would have taken the strength of a hundred Bull Worths to make it even tremble! As it was, it remained as solid as the mountains outside, as if in derision of his puny efforts.

To the door by which the detective had got away he went, but it was as immovable as the trap in the floor.

"I must get out of this. Let me see! What can I do?"

A sudden thought struck him. He hastily dragged the table to one corner of the room, and got upon it. Then he felt along the ceiling which was formed only of the inside of the sloping roof of pine slabs covered with weather-strips.

"Ah! If ther old man knew thet I wuz on ter this hyar arrangement I s'pose he'd be mad. But Bull Worth hez been 'round this ranch afore, an' he allers keeps his eyes wide open."

There was an ugly grin that allowed his yellow teeth to glisten in the flare of the one candle as he mumbled to himself while his long fingers were busily plucking at the strips of wood over his head.

At last he found what he wanted. A few dexterous twitches, and he had pushed aside some of the logs that had seemed perfectly solid, and made an opening big enough for him to crawl through to the roof.

Grasping the edges of the opening, Bull gave a spring and drew himself up to the outside.

Hardly had he raised himself above the level of the roof, when a rifle-shot rung out clear and terrible, and Bull Worth, with a horrible curse, dropped back upon the table, and thence to the floor of the room from which he was trying to escape.

CHAPTER XIII.

AN UNEXPECTED RECOGNITION.

PEACHBLOSSOM realized that he was in terrible peril as soon as he heard the directions of Mad Sharp to Bull Worth as he came up the ladder. He knew that the latter would be glad of any excuse for assassinating him, and that, shut up in Mad Sharp's ranch, with all the advantages on the side of the enemy, the detective would be almost completely at their mercy.

As soon as he had got through the doorway from the inner to the outer room, however, he felt safer. He knew then that he had at least a fighting chance for his life and the accomplishment of the purpose that had brought him to Colorado.

He lost no time in getting to the roof. The trap-door was fastened, as we know, with a wooden beam and by means of a Yale lock.

Peachblossom, standing on the table, and with the light of his small bull's-eye lantern—which, fortunately, he had ready for use in his pocket, but which he had not dared to open while groping in the dark in the other room—thrown upon the logs that formed the roof, soon saw that he

was to have considerable difficulty in getting out.

"Nevertheless," he muttered, "get out I must. It is the strangest thing to me that the trap is closed, when I could have sworn that I felt the cold air from it while I was in the other room."

He examined the trap again. It was as secure as Mad Sharp had left it when he followed the detective and Bull Worth into the room from the roof some hours before.

"Well, this is a mystery," he continued to himself. "A trap-door wide open one minute, and the next closed and locked, with no one here to do it."

The detective felt something like a chill run up and down his back. There was not much superstition in his nature, but this seemed something like supernatural work, and he felt uncomfortable in spite of himself.

"Pshaw! Peachblossom, don't be a fool. In a place like this, owned by a sly old fox like Mad Sharp, you must expect to meet with things that you cannot understand all at once. What you need is patience and perseverance."

This reasoning with himself seemed to give the detective courage, for, jumping lightly from the table, he used his lantern to look all about the little room in the hope of alighting upon something that would solve the problem.

"Ah! Here is something!"

He had pounced upon something shining that lay upon the floor a little way under the cot-bed. It was a key, attached to a small steel ring.

In another second, he was standing upon the table trying the key in the Yale lock that fastened the trap-door in the roof.

His heart beat a little harder than usual with anxiety as he put the key to the lock. Then a joyful cry escaped him. The key fitted!

He did not stop now to consider how or why the trap-door had been opened, and the key left on the floor. All that he thought of was how to get out as quickly as possible.

It was an easy task for him to remove the heavy beam. Then his way lay unobstructed before him. He pushed open the trap, and was just about to draw himself up, when—Bang!—a rifle-shot.

The detective was not anxious to be shot by an unseen foe, so he prudently remained standing upon the table, and listening to the tumbling of Bull Worth in the next room.

The rifle-shot was that which caused the redoubtable Bull to drop, as related in the last chapter.

"Now, the question is, who was that shot meant for and why is my honest neighbor on the other side of that wall performing acrobatic feats by himself? Perhaps he was startled. Though I can hardly believe that, for to my own knowledge he has been used to hearing the discharge of fire-arms for some years. However, Mr. Worth's proceedings matter but little to me just now. My business is to get out of here as quickly as possible, and avoid getting shot, if I can."

Cautiously he pulled himself up through the hole. Fortunately, there was a parapet that arose higher in front of this opening than at the place where Bull had exposed himself to the mysterious sharpshooter in the shadows of the island below.

Peachblossom managed to get out of the hole and lie down below the parapet without exposing himself in the least to any one that might be on the watch outside.

"Yes, this is all very well," he reflected. "But as soon as I put the ladder over the edge of the parapet my amiable friend out there, whom I believe to be Mad Sharp, will make a hole in me, and bring my expedition for Matthew Thorne, Esq., to an abrupt termination. I cannot find the will and the dust with a rifle-bullet in my brain."

Peachblossom laughed in his noiseless way at his own conceit, but his brain was busy all the time, notwithstanding.

If he could not get over the parapet at this particular spot without being detected, he would go around the corner!

The resort was a simple one, but only those who have been in situations of great danger know how likely men are to overlook what is obviously the best plan of action.

As soon as the Drummer Detective thought of a way out of his dilemma, he proceeded to put it into operation.

Lying flat upon the roof, he dragged himself to the corner of the house, pulling the ladder, that lay along the gutter, with him. He could not jump from such a height to the ground, and the ladder was all he had to trust to to get him to a place of safety.

When he reached the corner he found himself completely exposed, but the darkness fortunately gave him the protection that was no longer afforded by the parapet, and he felt comparatively safe.

Cautiously and laboriously he dragged the ladder and at last finding himself beyond the spot where he could be seen by the unknown who had fired the shot, unless, indeed the latter had shifted his position, he let the ladder down to the ground, and ventured to stand upright.

All well, so far.

He put his foot upon the ladder, and, agile as a cat, had reached the ground before any one could have taken aim at him.

"Now, for a little reconnoitering," he muttered, as he drew one of his shining revolvers from the back of his coat collar, and examined the hammer and cylinder as well as he could, in the dark.

The pistol was in excellent order, with the six chambers loaded, and Peachblossom felt now that he could hold his own against a dozen desperadoes. Lack of courage was not one of the Drummer Detective's failings as the reader may have already noted.

He took off his hat and brushed it carefully on his sleeve. Then, as he replaced it on his head, with as much care as if he had been going for a stroll on Broadway on a summer afternoon, brushed his coat and trousers with his hands, and pulled himself together generally.

"I would as soon be out of the world as not make a presentable appearance in it," he muttered. "I suppose my coat is full of dust. I will take it off and give it a good shade."

The detective was as good as his word. Putting his pistol loosely in his hip-pocket, he took off his coat and gave it a good shake. As he did so, his white shirt-sleeves shone out in strong relief against the dark background of the house.

He was reminded of this fact by hearing two shots in quick succession, and then feeling the wind of the bullets as they passed one on each side of his head and buried themselves in the logs of the house behind him.

"Hands up!" shouted a voice—that of a female—from the darkness.

Up went the detective's hands, but the left dropped quickly to his coat collar and dragged forth a revolver, which glistened in the light of a few stars that had just made their appearance.

The glistening of the revolver was fatal to the detective.

Another shot rung out, and the bullet, striking the shining barrel, sent it flying from his hand, and he was helpless.

"Ha, ha!" laughed the female voice again. "You can't have things all your own way, Mr. Bull Worth."

The detective had hardly time to realize that he had been mistaken for Bull Worth by his extraordinary assailant, or to wonder how Marie Sharpe had got outside (for he felt sure the female could be no one else) when two men sprung upon him from somewhere, and bearing him to the ground, deftly disarmed him of his remaining revolver and bowie-knife without uttering a word.

The next surprise that Peachblossom enjoyed was to find his wrists encircled by a pair of handcuffs, which were put on in the most business-like way by one of the men, while the other thrust a piece of worm-eaten and very unpalatable wood into his mouth to serve as a gag.

"You skunk!" exclaimed the man who had gagged him, as he slapped the detective's face apparently in a spirit of wanton cruelty.

"Now, tell me whar he is!" hissed the other man in the ear of Peachblossom.

"Yes, where is he? Blame me if I would ask you twice! I would snuff you out as I would a guinea-pig, if I had the say-so."

"Don't be a fool," here interrupted the female voice as a third person, a woman, who had been standing back in the shadow, now came forward so as to throw her outline between the starlit sky and the detective's vision.

"All right, my dear; I won't if I can help it," answered the last speaker, submissively. "But why don't he own up? He knows where—"

"Shut up," commanded the woman, sharply.

"Yes, my—"

"Hold your tongue!"

The man did not reply. He felt, probably, that it would not be discreet to do so.

In the mean time, Peachblossom, lying on his back, handcuffed and gagged, with one man kneeling upon his chest, and another leaning over his face as if waiting for an excuse to strike him again, felt decidedly uncomfortable, and wondered what would be the end of his extraordinary adventure.

"Now, sir, we want to know where the man is that you have been hunting down. If you will tell us quietly, perhaps you will be allowed to go. But if you have played any dirty trick on him, why, the boys can do with you as they like so far as I am concerned."

It was the woman that was speaking, and though her voice was low and gentle, entirely unlike the tones in which she had just snubbed her companion, there was a ring of determination in it that boded no good for the detective unless he could answer her question to her satisfaction.

Peachblossom did not answer. He had a good reason for his silence. The worm-eaten wood was thrust so far into his mouth that he not only could not speak, but was powerless to make even the slightest noise.

The man who had been snubbed noticed this, and in spite of the awe in which he evidently held the lady, ventured to remark:

"A man can't talk with the trunk of a tree down his throat. Give him some sort of a show. P'raps he will tell if you take the gag out of his mouth."

"You idiot! What made you put it in? I never did see such a man as you are in all my life. You would spoil anything that you ever touched."

"Shall I take it out?" returned the man.

"Shall I take it out!" repeated the woman, mimicking his voice. "Of course! No one but a fool would ask such a question."

The man removed the wood a great deal more gently than he put it in, for the woman was watching him as closely as she could in the gloom, and he did not know exactly which way her humor would turn. She might take the side of the prisoner against him, for all he could tell.

This the detective inferred from his manner, and as he spit out the fragments of wood that clung to his tongue, he could not help smiling a little over the discomfiture of his tormentor.

"Now, will you tell us whar he is?" asked the other man, gruffly.

He spoke a little louder than he had before, and Peachblossom had recovered his customary coolness. Both these causes enabled the detective to recognize the voice.

"Where is who?" asked Peachblossom, quietly.

"None uv yer foolin', now. You know who I mean."

"Gol darn him! I should like to have him to myself. If I wouldn't make him talk sense," put in the other man, indignantly.

"Did I tell you to shut up?"

The woman had actually taken the snubbed one by the ear and given it a vigorous tweak.

"You did, my—"

"Well, why don't you do as you are told?"

The snubbed one had nothing to reply, and the woman addressing Peachblossom, said:

"Will you tell us where he is? You are not gagged now, and it will be wise for you to answer."

"My good lady—" answered the detective.

"Don't you 'good lady' me. I am asking you a simple question, you mean scoundrel. And then you dare call me 'your good lady!'"

"I'll—" broke in the snubbed one, hotly, but he was summarily squelched by the lady, who forcibly thrust him to one side, and continued her address to the detective:

"You know where he is, and unless you have killed him, you can tell us where to find him."

"Who are you looking for?" asked the detective, calmly. "What is the name of this absent individual who is causing you so much trouble?"

"You know his name very well," replied the woman. "It is Peachblossom."

"Peachblossom? That is a queer name," observed the detective.

"Queer or not, you'd better tell us whar he is, ef yer want ter keep life in yer miserable carcass another minute."

The detective had purposely spoken in low tones and disguised his voice as much as possible, but he could not contain himself, and burst into a hearty laugh that was altogether his own, and exclaimed, with the deepest enjoyment:

"Why, bless your innocent heart! I am Peachblossom!"

The woman started back, and without warning began pummeling the snubbed one with her left fist and the pistol that she held in her right hand alternately.

The other man, who had been kneeling upon the Drummer Detective's chest, started when he heard the well-known laugh. Then, without a word, he hastily unlocked the handcuffs, gave both hands to the detective, and pulled him to his feet. His next proceeding was to take off his wide-brimmed felt hat and going to the wall of the house, bang his head against it half-a-dozen times with great viciousness.

"Hold on there. Don't hurt yourself!" expostulated Peachblossom. "What are you doing?"

"Tryin' ter knock ther brains out uv er gold-durned fool!" was the gruff reply.

"Oh, no. You're all right. But I am surprised that Red Bill would ever mistake Peachblossom for Bull Worth," laughed the detective.

"No one but a fool would ha' done it," growled Red Bill.

"It was all your fault!" suddenly cried the woman, attacking the snubbed one.

The latter, who, perhaps it is unnecessary to introduce as Tony Black, threw up his hands deprecatingly as he faintly remarked:

"Amelia, I'm afraid you are prejudiced against me. You blame me for everything."

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE ENEMY'S STRONGHOLD.

"BUT how does all this happen?" demanded the detective, when the first surprise at the meeting had somewhat subsided.

"We wuz determined ter find yer, Cap, and I got Tony Black—a mighty squar' little fellow he is, too—to come along and show me ther way. We see yer white shirt 'gainst ther house thar, an' 'Melia Black jist blazed away at yer, thinkin' ez yer wuz Bull Worth. Yer see, we 'spected

ez yer wuz shut up in ther ranch thar, an' didn't hev no idee uv seein' yer outside. From what old Mad Sharp let drop—"

"Mad Sharp?" interrupted the detective, eagerly.

"Yes. But—let 'Melia tell yer 'bout it. She kin talk nicer an' easier nor I kin."

"We've got Mad Sharp a prisoner," said Amelia, "but he is such a slippery old fellow that I'm afraid of him. I don't want him to get his liberty again till Tony and I are out of Colorado."

"Why not?"

"If you knew as much about Mad Sharp as I do, you wouldn't ask that," observed Tony.

"Well, where is Mad Sharp?" asked the detective.

"We have him lying in the bottom of that boat over there. 'Melia knocked the senses out of him first, and then we tied him up with ropes that we found in the boat."

"But that thar hotel feller got away! Cuss him!" put in Red Bill, with great heartiness.

"Meaning Bobson?" asked Tony.

"Yes."

"Ah! He's a mean feller, and as slick as he is mean," observed Tony, with a shake of the head. "I've known him for years."

"But I don't understand about Mad Sharp. He was in the ranch here not very long ago," said the Peachblossom, somewhat bewildered.

"Wal, it wuz this hyar way," answered Red Bill. "When we got ter ther valley hyar, on ther other side uv ther creek, we heerd er shot."

"The shot that I heard," observed the detective, half aloud.

"Eh?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Wal, we didn't know who wuz er blazin' around us, but we proposed ter find out ez soon ez we could. Ther next thing ez we knowed wuz when we wuz ergoin' ter cross ther water in er canoe, an' that consarned old man kin and laid us out—or would ha' done it ef 'Melia Black hadn't taken a hand in and made old Mad Sharp's head ache with the stock uv her Winchester. I tell yer, Cap, she's er daisy, so she is."

The stars had been increasing in number in the sky, and it was now much lighter than when Peachblossom had offered his white shirt-sleeves as a mark for Amelia Black's rifle.

The boat in which Mad Sharp had been left could be distinguished rising and falling gently with the ripple of the water, and the mountains on the other side arose sharply in their black mass against the distant sky.

The brain of the detective had been active while listening to the explanations of his companions. He had come to Colorado with a certain object in view, and it seemed to him that the events of the last twelve hours or so, while apparently unpropitious at first, might prove lucky, after all.

"I have Red Bill here, and Mad Sharp is a prisoner. My calculations are that the will and gold-dust are concealed, if not in the house, at least very near it. Old Mad Sharp would certainly object to my pursuing researches in the neighborhood of his property. But, now that he is safely tied up in that boat, I think the best thing we can do is to keep him a captive until we have found what we want. We have plenty of justification for our action, for it is obvious that he intended to put me out of the way, and his attack upon Red Bill and the Blacks, with that scoundrel of a Bobson, would be enough to send him to jail for a while, even without anything else."

Thus Peachblossom reflected, and his mind was soon made up.

"Bill," he said, as he gave his coat another shake and tried to remove as much as possible, the soils his clothing had received, during his recent rough-and-tumble adventures with his friends.

"Wal, Cap."

"We have work before us, that will take all our care and pluck to put through."

"Such work ez you hev gin'rally does," was Bill's phlegmatic response.

"We must get into that house, and hold possession of it until we finish what we have to do. You understand, Bill?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, to business. Let us go down and take that old fellow out of the boat. We will make him secure somewhere. Then we will see what is next to be done. Bobson was with him, but got away, you say?"

"Yes; Tony had him down, when 'Melia came up and belted Mad Sharp. Then, in their racket, Bobson got away."

"Just because that blockhead let him go," put in Amelia, giving her husband a wrathful push.

"I was so glad to see you, my dear, that I did not think of anything else," submitted Tony, humbly.

Peachblossom stopped this discussion by walking hastily toward the boat that had been secured by a rope to a log imbedded in the shore. He remembered that Bull Worth was in the ranch, and although he had heard him fall he did not know whether he was hurt badly enough to keep him out of mischief, or not.

"I don't want that fellow interfering before I am ready for him," was his mental remark.

To seize the rope and haul in the boat was the work of a moment for the detective. Even as he did so he had a presentiment that the event verified when he looked into the boat.

Mad Sharp had disappeared!

"Wha-a-a-t?" yelled Red Bill. "Gone. Why he must be ther devil himself. It isn't half an hour since I saw him lying thar, an' I've been within er few yards of him ever since. How c'u'd he hev got away without our seein' him?"

"The how matters but little, Bill. He certainly has got away, and that is enough for us. Moreover, since he has escaped, we may be sure that he will not long remain idle."

Bang! bang!

Two rifle-shots!

Fortunately, for the Drummer Detective and Red Bill, both had stooped at the same moment to make a closer examination of the boat. This circumstance alone prevented the truly-aimed bullets going through their heads. Had they stooped a moment sooner, it would not have availed them, for the marksmen, whoever they were, would have taken aim at them in that position, doubtless with fatal effect. As it was, the detective and his companion had happened to lower their heads at the critical moment when the fingers of the shooters were on the triggers, and when they had no time to change their aim.

"Drop!" shouted the detective.

Not only he and Red Bill stretched themselves flat on the ground, but Amelia, always quicker-witted than her husband, pulled him down, so that he lay by her side, flat and out of range, unless the riflemen had unusually good positions for picking them off.

The four friends were none too soon in their maneuvers, for two more shots rung out, at once followed by another two so quickly that the four bullets seemed to whiz over their heads almost simultaneously.

"Aha! They are on the other side of the lake!" said the detective to himself. "It is well to know that much."

He had heard the bullets rattling against the wall of the ranch.

As he lay he could watch the house, and he saw that up to the present time there had been no sign of life in it visible from the outside since he had slid down the ladder.

Where was Marie? He had thought of the girl several times, and had come to the conclusion that she had left the ranch with her father, by some means of egress known only to themselves.

Clearly the best thing to do now was to get to the ranch, and seek protection for the rest of the night from the bullets that threatened them every moment that they stayed outside.

How Mad Sharp had managed to get away he did not know, but he had not the least doubt that it was he who was blazing away so recklessly, with the assistance of a companion, who of course could be none other than the sneaking hotel-keeper, Zed Bobson.

Peachblossom had taken command as soon as he was recognized by the three persons with him and they were prepared to act promptly in accordance with anything that he might direct.

In a loud whisper he called to Tony.

"Get around the corner of the house, but do not stand up."

"All right."

"Bill, you do the same thing."

In about fifteen minutes Tony, Amelia and Red Bill were where the detective had told them to be—at the side of the house, out of range of the deadly rifles across the lake, unless the enemy should have shifted their position.

Peachblossom was wrestling with the ladder. He had determined to climb into the ranch again by the same way that he had come out, but he could not do that without the ladder.

"Halloa! What in thunder is that?" exclaimed Red Bill, with a slight groan.

"Nothing, Bill. Don't be afraid," laughed the detective, as he crawled around the corner.

The ladder had tipped over, and sliding gently down the wall of the ranch, had hit Red Bill in the back with some force.

"I ain't 'fraid, Cap. An' anything you say goes, uv course, even ef it knocks my spine out uv j'int," returned Red Bill, with comical resignation.

The firing had stopped across the lake. Whether the operations of the detective could be distinguished in the gloom by the unseen foe he could not tell, but judging by the certainty of their aim before, it was natural to suppose that they could.

"Up with the ladder, Bill!"

"Kin I stand up?"

"Yes, I guess so."

Red Bill arose to an upright posture, and taking off his hat with his right hand, wiped his forehead with a coarse red handkerchief with his left. As he did so he stretched his right arm to take some of the stiffness from his joints.

Bang! There was a bullet-hole through his hat.

"Ah! They are watching things pretty closely over there. Bill, you want to keep well within cover. You let your hat show beyond

the corner that time," observed Peachblossom, coolly.

"I hope I'll git through without gittin' er shot through my head," said Red Bill. "Thet thar old man is er dandy on ther shoot, ain't he?"

There was a touch of admiration in Red Bill's tone. He could not withhold his tribute from the marksmanship even of a deadly foe.

Meanwhile Peachblossom was raising the ladder to the top of the wall, opposite the trap-door that he knew led to the room from which he had escaped a short time before. Red Bill put his hand to the ladder and assisted.

No sooner was it planted than Peachblossom ran lightly to the top and peered over the parapet.

Everything was as he had left it. The open trap the empty room, with the door leading to the next closed and locked.

There was no time to waste! He leaped over the parapet, and letting himself through the hole, examined the room and listened at the door. All was silent.

"I don't exactly know what all this means, but I will soon find out. Come, Bill! All of you come up."

He had leaped out of the hole again, and was looking over the parapet at his trusty lieutenant.

Amelia Black shoved her husband upon the ladder first, and he, who had been an acrobat, among other things, in a circus, was soon up and sitting contentedly upon the sloping roof, waiting for orders. Red Bill followed, rather more slowly, and then Amelia ran lightly up the rungs.

The ladder was pulled up and laid along the gutter as the detective had seen Mad Sharp do it, and then he motioned to his companions to go into the room.

"Pistols ready!" he directed, shortly.

Each showed a revolver.

"Good! I will close this trap. I do not think we are likely to be disturbed from the outside just now, but it is as well to make sure."

The trap secured with beam and key, the detective happened to place his hand between two beams of the ceiling, as he withdrew the key from the lock, and found a small hole just big enough to admit a man's hand, close to the lock. It was covered with a small lid that fitted closely into place, and would never be discovered unless one were aware of its existence. It had been accidentally left open now, or probably it would not have been found by Peachblossom. He saw at once that by means of this hole Mad Sharp had been able to fasten the trap from the outside, but having dropped the key to the floor, could not make use of it to get in again.

Peachblossom smiled with satisfaction at this discovery. He had Mad Sharp at a slight disadvantage here, at all events, whatever might happen in the future.

CHAPTER XV.

MARIE HEARS A SIGNAL.

PERHAPS it will be as well now to go back a little, and follow the movements of Mad Sharp and his daughter when the sound of the shot outside the ranch disturbed the sleight-of-hand entertainment of the detective.

After hustling Bull Worth and Peachblossom up-stairs, the old man looked at his daughter significantly, and she bowed her head in acknowledgment.

"That's Bobson," observed Mad, in a matter-of-fact way.

"Yes, dad. Do you want me to go along?"

"I don't know yet. Wait a minute. Go and look after the horses, and have them ready in case I give the signal."

The girl disappeared through the doorway at one end of the dining-room, while Mad Sharp made his exit through one at the other.

In a moment he returned with two rifles, one considerably heavier than the other. Both were of the Winchester repeating pattern.

Carefully he examined the weapons, and then, after making sure that his cartridge-belt was supplied with ammunition, listened attentively at the foot of the ladder that led to the apartment in which he had secured the detective.

"That feller is after it, I know. These smart Eastern detectives think ther old man is asleep, I guess. Wal, I'll teach this hyar feller a lesson ez he'll never forget. When er man tries ter rob old Mad Sharp he's got ter be almighty slick. Ef I can't find thet thar dust myself I'll let it stay whar it wuz put. I don't propose to hev my gal beat out uv her property ef I kin help it."

Mad Sharp's countenance retained its benevolent appearance in spite of the fact that he ground his teeth malevolently as he hissed through them the above remarks. His patriarchal beard and soft blue eyes insisted that he should look like a saint, even while his heart was full of the most murderous passions.

He could not hear a sound from the room above, and, with a shrug of satisfaction, he walked to the end of the room, and opened the door.

A long, tunnel-like place, lighted by a candle stuck in a bottle on a ledge by the side of the

door, but stretching away in the distance into utter darkness.

The tramping of horse's hoofs could be heard, mingling with the voice of his daughter as she spoke soothingly to her "Fan" and the black charger of Mad Sharp.

A softer smile spread over the face of the old man as he heard Marie speaking, and, with his Winchester still resting easily in the hollow of his left arm, he walked swiftly down the tunnel toward the sounds.

The floor sloped, but at the end of some dozen yards turned abruptly to the left, and then, after going a few yards, swung around again, so that it ran under the first slope, and brought the explorer to a spot immediately beneath the dining-room, where the sounds of the horses had been heard by Peachblossom as he shuffled the cards.

A lantern, with a lighted candle inside, hung against a post, throwing a feeble glimmer over three horses, each in a loose stall. Each was a splendid animal, but all of different colors. There was the coal-black horse that Mad Sharp always used, a handsome chestnut, and last, "Fan," the dappled gray that was such a favorite of the young girl's.

Marie was pressing her face against Fan's nose, and whispering lovingly to her. The girl loved her mare as much as if the animal was a human being.

"Well, dad?"

The girl looked inquiringly at her father, while she called attention to the fact that his black horse, Demon, was saddled and bridled, ready for instant use.

"You didn't put them things on him in ther few minutes you hev been down hyar, did you?" asked Mad, in incredulous tones.

"No. I left them on when we came in, 'cept thet I took ther bits out uv tha'r mouths. They are all ready now."

"Well, trot 'em out."

Obediently, the girl touched the bridles of the two horses. They understood the signal, and followed her further into the darkness, opposite the quarter from which her father had come.

"Gently, Fan; don't knock me down," she cooed to her beautiful mare, as the animal pushed her nose lovingly against the neck of her young mistress.

Mad Sharp, with his rifle on his arm, watched the girl and her mare, and then, with something like a sigh, walked after her, resting his hand upon the mane of his black Demon as he did so.

The way now led through a narrow passage, through which there was no more room than was required by the two horses, and so low that their hands brushed against the roof when they raised them at intervals.

As they passed along, occasionally the streams of water—or, rather, drops of water—dropped upon their heads, while the lap-lapping that told of a stream or pool trying to break its bounds, struck their ears in a continuous dreary lullaby.

Neither Marie nor her father made any comment upon this, however. They evidently understood it, and were not surprised.

"Marie!"

"Yes, dad."

"I did not bring your gun."

The girl hastily put her hand beneath the lapel of her neat, tightly-fitting jacket, on her right side, and drawing a handsome, silver-mounted revolver, inlaid with pearl, held it up so that it flashed in the light of the lantern.

"Yes, yes; that's all right, in course. But when I said gun, I meant yer rifle," went on Mad, petulantly.

"Oh!"

"Oh! Yes! and Oh! again! I want yer to go with me. But I want yer ter be heeled. See?"

"Why?"

"'Cause tha'r's trouble hyar in ther valley ez sure ez my name is Madison Sharpe."

"Why? I thought thet was jist Zeb Bobson's signal. I s'pose it's on'y 'bout ther usual bizness," observed the girl, faintly curious.

"Yes, you s'pose, Marie. Jist like er gal, ter be s'posin' when er man kin see more trouble under his nose than yer kin shake er stick at."

"Dad!" cried the girl, deprecatingly. It was so seldom that her father spoke crossly to her that it hurt her feelings very much when he did so.

"Oh, well, never mind, Marie! I didn't mean ter talk mean ter yer, but I'm worried over this hyar thing ter-night. Take ther horses out, an' hold 'em under ther shaddow uv ther house. I'll go back, git yer Winchester, an' let myself out ther way I came in. Then I kin see thet thet tha'r Bull ain't playin' no dirty tricks on me. I don't trust him very much."

"Do you trust any one, dad?"

A sweet smile mantled the saintly face of the old man as he shook his head slowly, and answered:

"No one—'cept you."

Marie kissed him, and the next minute he had turned and was walking hastily back in the dark way he had come.

"Poor dad!" murmured Marie. "He hez ther whole country ag'in' him, I'm 'fraid. But

he hez his gal with him, an' we air ez good ez any six anyhow."

She walked along swiftly, and in a few minutes had come to the end of her journey in the passage.

The water was now streaming in faster than ever while the sound of the ripples was becoming more and more distinct.

A stout wooden door barred her further progress. It was secured by a heavy wooden bar and a spring lock. The bar removed and the spring pushed back, allowed the door to swing open.

She now found herself in a narrow space as dark as the passage she had left almost, although she could see a star or two far, far above her head, indicating that she had no other roof above her but the sky.

The space, while narrow, was of some twenty yards in length. It was a pit, apparently hewn from the solid rock, and evidently from the sound, close to a body of water.

Marie evidently knew where she was and what to do under the peculiar circumstances. She picked up the end of a plank that lay along the side of the pit upon the ground, and raised one end of it to the edge of the pit, so that it formed a slanting path to the top, strong enough to bear a horse, or two horses, if required.

"Go on, Drum!"

At the command, the black horse used by Mad Sharp ran lightly up the plank to the top and disappeared with a loud splash, as a shower of water flew into the pit and over the head of the girl.

"You rascal!" she exclaimed, laughingly. "I ought to hev got out uv ther way. Now, Fan!"

With this admonition to her dappled gray, Marie ran into the passage she had just left, as Fan ran up the plank, and with another splash, also vanished.

"Ah! Thet's better. No 'casion ter git drowned afore my time."

She shut the door of the passage by pulling it to so that the spring lock would catch. She pushed it to make sure that it was fastened, and then ran up the plank until she could look over the edge, without exposing anything more than her head to chance gazers in the vicinity.

The sight that met her vision, though familiar to her, was, notwithstanding, a strange one, such as would have been entirely unexpected by a person looking out for the first time.

On all sides of the pit was water. The hole was in the middle of the lake, and seen from the shore, looked like a small island of rock. It was one of the freaks of nature in which the Great West seems to delight, as if to show man how trifling are his most ambitious engineering feats compared with what Dame Nature can do by one effort in her ordinary playful moods. Such a pit, hewn out of the everlasting rock, in such a position, would have been almost an impossibility by artificial means. Yet, here it was, the result of some convulsion perhaps a score of centuries before, made use of by a man who had chanced to discover it.

Marie, as has been said, was not surprised, because it had been familiar to her from her childhood. She had never wondered, save in the most desultory way, how the pit had come there. She was content to accept it as it was, and to use it in the way taught her by her father.

"Ah! Tha'r they go. An' by gracious, I do believe Fan will get tha'r first. She's giving Demon a close tug fer it. Well done, Fan! Strike out, old gal, an' you'll git ther shore a minute ahead uv him. Why! Wouldn't that make dad mad ef he wuz to see his Demon left behind in er race, either on land or water!"

In the ecstasy of her delight, Marie clapped her hands, and her eyes sparkled like diamonds in the gloom as she watched two black masses moving laboriously through the water, leaving a white trail in their wake.

The horses were swimming to the shore, and it was evident to her that they had entered into a race on their own account, and that her favorite dappled gray was winning it.

She laughed out loud at last, as she recognized Fan running up the bank alone, and trotting away with the gait that her mistress knew so well. Some thirty seconds afterward the black horse, Demon, crawled out of the water, but it was evident that he felt chagrined over his defeat by the mare, for he loped away in a disconsolate manner, that told plainly he had lost heart in the race.

"Poor thing!" muttered Marie. "I don't like ter see even a horse feel bad, but I'm mighty glad my Fan got away with him, all ther same!"

She put her hand along the edge of the pit on the outside, in the water, which came within a few inches of the top, and would often, if the surrounding mountains did not thoroughly protect it from the wind, pour over the side, and flood the passage along which she had brought the horses.

"Whar in thunderation is that tha'r rope?" she muttered. "Durn thet thing; is it gone?"

She poked about a little longer, and then an exclamation of satisfaction proclaimed that she had found that for which she was searching.

She dragged a rope to the surface of the water, and following it, reached an iron ring fastened to the outside of the rock, some six inches under the water.

Untying it deftly, she pulled and pulled with all her strength. The result was that a flat-bottomed, heavy rowboat came floating lazily toward her.

She stepped into it, and taking one of the oars in her hand, paddled toward the shore where the horses had landed.

She had taken but half a dozen strokes when she paused, and listened intently.

"Ah! I thought I heard dad's signal."

A long, low whine, like that of a sleepless cur, but with a peculiar snappy growl at the end, had struck her ear.

Putting one of her hands before her mouth, she made a sound so much like the other, that it might have emanated from the throat of the same sleepless cur that had whined before.

"Somethin' goin' on, ez sure ez I'm hyar," she whispered, as she tried to pierce the darkness in the direction from which she had heard the whine.

Again the same noise, but with two short, snappy growls, instead of one.

She did not reply now, but taking both oars in her hands, rowed with long, swift strokes toward the lower end of the valley, away from the ranch.

CHAPTER XVI.

MAD SHARP IN BONDAGE.

As the girl rowed, she gradually bore toward the bank upon the right, but not going too near.

Suddenly she stopped and listened.

The steady thud-thud, plunkity-plunkity of horses' hoofs, mingled with an occasional sharp click or a scrape, as they struck a rock or kicked up sand.

She was sure, from the sound which revealed to her the gait of the horses, that they were Fan and Demon.

But were they running by themselves, or had they riders, and if so, who were they?

She had no doubt that her father was bestriding his black steed, Demon, but who was on the back of her dappled gray?

It may be asked how she knew that Fan was ridden by any one, but Marie Sharpe had been in the saddle most of her life, and her trained ear could easily distinguish, by the hoof-beats whether a horse, especially her own, was riderless or not.

She rowed along again, now that she could hear the horses were abreast of her, although she could not see them. They were going in the same direction as herself, and her father's signal had warned her to reach the lower end of the valley as soon as possible.

"I wish they would git er little closer to ther lake, so ez I c'd see something 'bout 'em, I don't like my Fan ter be ridden ter death by every scallawag ez comes along, especially when I know ez she was tired ez she is ter-day!"

Marie did not mind fatigue herself, but she was very jealous of her mare being overworked.

"Ah! I kin see 'em now. They are gittin' nearer!"

She dropped her right oar for a moment, put her hand over her mouth, and yelped with a long-drawn out agony that echoed from one end of the valley to the other.

There was no answer, so she yelped again.

A deep-base growl, such as a big dog will utter before seizing the throat of an enemy, came out of the darkness from the direction of the flying hoof-beats.

"My! Ther governor's mad now, an' no mistake. Marie, my dear, ye'd better 'tend ter yer bizness an' say nothin'. But by jiminy, I should like ter know who is er usin' Fan thet way. I kin tell by ther sound uv her feet ez she is dead tired."

It seemed now that her anxiety with regard to Fan was about to be relieved for the horses ran toward the water and she could plainly make out a small, thin figure astride of her mare.

"Wal, I might ha' knowed it," ejaculated the girl, with ineffable disgust.

She could not say any more, but she rowed with a viciousness that indicated how deep was her dislike of the rider of her petted dappled-gray.

Meanwhile the two horses drew close to the bank, and the girl, in response to the evident desire of her father to speak to her, rowed inshore.

"Marie!"

"Yes, dad!"

"Come right in hyar."

"Yes, dad."

She rowed up against the bank, but it was of solid rock at that particular point, so she pushed out again, with the intention of seeking a more convenient landing-place.

"Marie!" repeated her father sharply, although doubtless if it had been light enough to see him, Marie would have looked upon the placid, benevolent expression of countenance that her father always wore, and that could not be disturbed, apparently, even by the most turbulent passions.

"Yes, dad!" repeated the girl.
 "Why don't you come in hyar, when I tell yer?"
 "Give me a minute's time, dad."
 "I ain't got no minute's time ter spare. 'Sides—"

The old man hesitated, and Marie with her quick woman's wit, knew why; but she only said, quietly, still looking for a soft place in which to run the nose of her boat ashore:

"Sides what?"
 "Hyar's Zed Bobson."
 The girl's dainty little nose turned up, as she replied, pertly:

"Wal, what's Zed Bobson ter me?"
 "Don't be cruel, Marie!" here put in a whining voice that set poor Marie's teeth on edge.

"Who told yer ter use my Christian name, Bobson?" she demanded, indignantly.
 "Yer dad, Marie."

"Did yer, dad; did yer?" asked the girl, with flashing eyes, as, having at last found the soft place in the bank for which she was looking, she grounded her boat and leaped ashore, still holding the rope that secured the boat, however.

"Don't be er fool, Marie. This hyar ain't no time fer bandying words 'bout nothin'."

"Nothin', dad?"

"Yes, nothin'. Yer dad's right. You air making a row 'bout nothin' at all—Marie," said Bobson, with a triumphant grin that the girl felt, although it was too dark to see it.

The speech and the grin were unlucky for the keeper of Bobson's Hotel.

"Git off thet thar mare!" almost screamed Marie, as she stepped to the head of her beautiful dappled-gray, and looked at the outline of his rider.

"Eh?"
 "Marie!" interposed her father.

But the girl's blood was up now—and she took no notice of the parental remonstrance, although as a rule, she was strictly obedient to the lightest expressed wish of her father.

"Git off thet thar mare, I told yer!"

"But—why?" asked Bobson, falteringly. There was not a man within a radius of twenty miles of Bobson's Corners that did not stand in awe of Mad Sharp's pretty daughter, when she allowed her temper to show itself.

"Git off thet thar mare," she repeated, with a calmness that meant mischief.

"But, yer dad—"

"Git off, I tell yer!"

"But—Miss Marie—"

"Will yer git off?"

"Yes, if yer father—"

"Git off!"

"Zed, you're er little too fresh, ez I've tole yer afore," here observed Mad Sharp. "Take my advice now, an' git off when she tells yer."

But Bobson had a streak of obstinacy in his composition, and he had made up his mind that he would overrule this girl now, not only because he wanted to use the mare a little longer, but because he thought that if he could assert his will against hers now, it might help him in his determination to make her his wife before he was much older—a design that perhaps the reader has already suspected him of harboring.

He looked down at Marie with an exasperating grin, and said coolly, but decidedly:

"I won't git off."

Thwack!

Marie's little white hand, doubled up into a hard fist, struck him squarely between the eyes, and knocked him flat on the mare's back.

"Git off!" cried Marie, who was now beside herself with passion.

Bobson might or might not have intended to obey, but Fan settled the question for him. She just reared up on her hind feet, and the unfortunate wretch upon her back slid over her tail to the ground head-first.

"Ha! Ha! Ha!"

A hearty laugh burst from the lips of Mad Sharp.

Zed Bobson picked himself up from the ground, felt himself all over to make sure that he was not broken to pieces. Then he picked up his Winchester that had been slung over his shoulder, but that fell to the ground when he received the blow from Marie's little fist, and stood meekly by Mad Sharp's side, waiting for orders from the old man.

"Zed, I told yer, you wuz too fresh!" exclaimed Mad Sharp. "As fer you, Marie, you're er little too handy with them knuckles uv yourn."

"Why didn't he git off'n my horse, then?" asked the girl, sullenly.

"Never mind. You git on her yerself now, and keep around hyar ready for ther signal. Come on, Bobson. You must not mind er gal's ways. And yer know, Zed, you wuz too fresh. I've tole yer so afore."

"Never mind, Mad. I ain't kickin', an' I don't know why any one should make er fuss ez long ez I don't," growled Bobson, as he put his hand tenderly to the sore spot where Marie's fist had been so vigorously planted.

Marie had already sprung upon the back of her beautiful dappled gray, who seemed as pleased to have her mistress on her back as Marie was to get there.

The girl, after asserting herself with Bobson, took no further notice of him, evidently considering him beneath her attention. Now, however, she turned to her father and asked him what he was going to do.

"Me an' Bobson is er-going down ther lake er piece. Hyar's your gun. Keep around hyar for a while, an' be ready with ther Demon in case you hear me call."

As the old man spoke he handed Marie her Winchester, which he had brought with him, he having left the ranch by the roof door, in the way that the reader knows all about.

"All right, dad. But what will yer do with Bobson ef it becomes necessary to git on horse-back ag'in, ez you seem ter think likely?"

"Bobson? That's so! What'll you do, Zed? You didn't bring no horse, did yer?"

"Yes, I did, but I left him back thar in ther thicket. I wuz 'fraid ter ride past them folks, an' I knew I could make almost ez good time on my two good feet, don't yer see?"

"Two big feet, yer mean!" remarked Marie, under her breath.

The girl did not like Bobson.

Mad Sharp was evidently getting tired of all this talk, for he brought it to a close by unceremoniously shoving Bobson into the boat all of a heap, narrowly escaping knocking him into the water.

"After what yu've tole me you'd stand blabbin' hyar till ther whole crowd dropped on us, wouldn't yer?" asked Mad, irritably.

Bobson did not reply. He saw that this was no time for argument. Besides, he realized that Mad Sharp's observation was a wise one. The enemy might drop upon them at any moment.

Marie, with her rifle slung over her shoulder, did not speak again. She sat on Tom's back, holding the leading rein attached to Demon's bridle in her left hand, and waiting for her father to leave her.

Mad stepped into the boat with Bobson, and as they rowed rapidly away, the muffled oars moving silently in the rowlocks, there was nothing but the splash of the oar-blades in the dark water to indicate that the whole surface of the lake was not clear of living presence.

In a few minutes the sounds of the splashes ceased as far as the girl was concerned, and she felt utterly alone, but not afraid. She was used to being out at night, by herself, or with her father, and as long as she had a revolver in the belt under the lapel of her jacket and her trusty Winchester rifle in her hand, she did not care for any mortal being.

Still, it was rather uncomfortable, sitting on horseback toward the small hours of the morning, on the edge of the lake that cooled the air very effectually, and—*What was that?*

She had been idly looking at the ranch in the distance, and observed that she could see the shape of the roof outlined sharply against the sky, gloomy as it was.

"I wish I wuz in you, in bed and asleep!" she thought wistfully, when something had caught her eye and made her exclaim, sharply, but inaudibly: "What was that?"

She did not wait for an answer to her mental query. She leveled her rifle at the figure of a man that she could see on the roof, and who certainly had no business to be leaving the house at the time in the morning, and, glancing along the sights of her weapon, pulled the trigger.

Bang! The man had disappeared.

She did not know who it was, but the reader, who remembers how Bull Worth dropped through the hole in the roof to the room below, does know.

"So much for thet thar skunk! I s'pose it wuz thet thar Drummer Detective. Wal, it's no use talkin'. He's er nice feller ter look at, but he means mischief to dad, an' it's my duty to rub him out ef he tries ter play dirt. Funny, too! He seems ter think dad don't know him. That's whar he fools himself!"

Marie rode up and down watching the house. But her one shot had evidently settled the individual who showed himself upon the roof, for she saw no one else.

Suddenly, she heard a shrill female scream in the direction to which her father and Zed Bobson had betaken themselves. The scream was followed by men's voices in angry contention. And then, all was still.

"Dad's in trouble, and he didn't even hev time ter give ther signal," exclaimed the girl to herself, breathlessly, as she put spurs to Fan, and, with Demon held by the leading rein, dashed toward the spot from which the sound had proceeded.

She had gone perhaps fifty yards, when she stopped, and leaping from the back of Tom, hastened both horses into a thicket of firs.

She heard the splash of oars again, and, lying flat on the ground, so that she could look over the water, she saw her father's flat-bottomed boat, of which she had so lately been an occupant, being rowed toward the ranch.

There were three people in the boat that she could make out, one of them evidently a woman.

Where was her father?

If it had been daylight she might have discovered that her father, Mad Sharp, lay in the bottom of the boat, tied hand and foot, half-unconscious, and a helpless prisoner.

CHAPTER XVII.

GETTING DOWN TO BUSINESS.

WHEN Peachblossom laughed to himself over the fact that by dropping the Yale key through the hole in the roof, Mad Sharp had shut himself out of his own house, by that approach at least, he did not delude himself with the idea that he had the best of the old man to any remarkable extent.

He rightly considered that while the old man had his liberty and his thorough knowledge of the ins and outs of the ranch, to say nothing of knowing like a book the topographical formation of the valley, with its placid lake, underground river and rocky walls, it would be no easy task to hunt for the will and the gold-dust that he was sure was hidden somewhere in the valley, if not in the ranch itself.

He listened at the door leading to the other room, in which he supposed Bull Worth to be. Then, drawing forth his ever-useful bull's-eye lantern, he flashed the light over the door and the bolts.

"Bill?" he whispered.

"Yes, Cap."

"I am going to open this door. Bull Worth may be waiting for us. So you, Tony and Mrs. Black must be ready in case of accidents."

"All right, Cap."

Peachblossom quickly slipped back the bolts and threw open the door, letting a stream of light from his lantern flash into the room in all directions as rapidly as possible.

The room was empty!

In the course of the traveling of his light about the apartment, it brought into view a candle lying upon the table by the side of the lamp that he had extinguished when he made up his mind to prevent Bull Worth watching him from the other room.

He saw that the rifles that he had noticed when he first entered the house with Mad Sharp were missing. But that he regarded as a matter of course. It was not likely that the old man would leave weapons for the use of a stranger who he had reason to expect would soon be an avowed enemy.

"Well, whatever has happened to my amiable friend, Bullard Worth, Esq., it is certain that he is not here. We must search further. If he has got out in some way, all well, but I believe he is sneaking somewhere about the house, and that he is likely to turn up at some unlucky moment and spoil all our business."

Thus thinking Peachblossom peered down the hole leading to the room below, and which was wide open. There was no light below, and the detective at once blew out the candle upon the table at his elbow. He did not care to present himself as such an excellent target to any shooter that might be in the dining-room.

No demonstration, hostile or otherwise, was made from the room below, and after pausing a moment, the detective put his foot cautiously through the hole and felt for the ladder.

As he had anticipated, it was not there.

"Another of Bull Worth's thoughtful arrangements," he muttered. "Well, it does not matter much."

He had noticed that the bed was well supplied with sheets and blankets. Pulling them off, in the dark, a few minutes' active work converted them into a rope long enough to reach to the table in the dining-room, with a goodly strip left over.

Fastening the end of his rope to a leg of the heavy table, he braced the table against the bedstead so that it could not slip, and seizing the rope, let himself softly down.

There was nothing on the table save the big lamp and the scattered cards with which he had been entertaining Sharp and his daughter and Bull Worth when the signal outside broke up the party.

Holding the end of the rope firmly, and with a revolver in his left hand ready for instant use, he called to Red Bill to let down Amelia Black.

"I don't need any help," broke in that independent lady, as she heard the detective's words. "I can come down by myself."

Sure enough, she was standing by the Drummer Detective's side, on the table, before he expected it, bringing her rifle with her.

A moment later, all four were on the floor of the dining-room, huddled against the table in the dark, listening, that they might determine whether there were any other occupants.

The detective was the first to break the silence.

"Bill."

"Ye, Cap."

"Light the lamp on this table."

"Yes, Cap. But, don't yer think it mought be rather dangerous?" whispered Bill, in the detective's ear.

"Do as I tell you."

The tone was one that Red Bill never dared to disobey, and the big lamp was lighted forthwith.

As the rays fell around the room, all four looked curiously about. No one but themselves was there, and the doors at either end were closed.

"Halloo! What's that?"

As the detective spoke he picked up a scrap

of paper lying among the fragments of the torn cards on the table.

The paper was blank on the upper side, but, upon turning it over, some rudely-scrawled writing, apparently executed with a burnt match, was apparent.

"Git, Joe Grattan, as soon as you can. This ain't no place for an Eastern man."

"A FRIEND."

"A poet, eh? But I must take the liberty of differing with my 'Friend.' I think this is the place for an Eastern man, when he has such important business as I have here," laughed Peachblossom, as he carefully placed the scrap of paper in his pocketbook.

"Who do yer think wrote that?" asked Red Bill.

"I will tell you later."

"All right, Cap."

Red Bill had been too well-trained by Peachblossom to persist with tiresome inquiries.

It was now two o'clock in the morning, and Tony and his wife began to show unmistakable signs of weariness, although they tried hard to hide them. As to the detective and Red Bill, they were used to losing sleep for days and nights at a stretch when prosecuting an important piece of work, and they never allowed fatigue to overcome them until they could safely afford to rest.

"Bill!"

"Yes, Cap."

"Search the room, and then look through the place at that end of the house."

He pointed toward the apartment underneath that from which the trap led up to the roof.

Red Bill went about his work without another word, lighting a candle to assist him in his search, while the detective, with Tony Black and Amelia at his heels, went the other way.

He soon found the sloping passage leading to the stables, and saw that there was a long, tunnel-like place ending he knew not where.

"I will explore that later," he muttered.

"One thing is sure: If Bull Worth is anywhere about the premises, he must be in that tunnel—unless, indeed, Bill has found him in that other room, which I do not at all expect."

"You fool! What are you doing?" burst from the gentle lips of Mrs. Black.

"I ain't doin' nothin'," answered Tony.

"Why, you've put your great hoofs on my foot. That's what you've done!" was the retort.

Then there was a great scuffling and scraping at the detective's elbow, mingled with remonstrances from the unlucky Tony, and irritable exclamations from his wife.

"You folks will give us all away if you do not stop that noise," said Peachblossom, smiling in spite of himself. "What is the trouble?"

"Oh, the same as usual. Tony is making a clumsy fool of himself!" answered Amelia, quickly.

"Nonsense! Tony is all right. He is a good friend of mine, and of yours, too. I am going to take his part. You are too hard upon him."

The detective spoke in a quiet way, that had considerable effect upon both his hearers. There was a sniff of satisfaction from Tony, and a cough of repentance from his wife.

"The fact is, you are both tired. Now, the best thing you can do is to go up to that big room and sleep till I call you."

"Why?" demanded Tony, becoming very wakeful in an instant.

"Why? Because there is nothing for you to do down here. Red Bill and I have certain business that you had better keep out of. You know that we are both sworn police officers, and, as such, have rights not belonging to private citizens. Besides, you do not want to get Mad Sharp down on you, if he should remain in this part of the country. This is a good section of the West for the show business, is it not?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. Now I will go up to the dining-room with you, see you safely up to your bedroom, and leave you in peace. Mad Sharp won't be likely to kill you for taking a few hours' sleep in his ranch."

"I knocked him down with my rifle a few hours ago. He will not forget that," observed Amelia, "and I do not care whether he does or not," she added, defiantly.

The detective smiled. He understood Mrs. Black's temper, and he rather admired it. At the same time, he did not wish her to be involved in this trouble with the old man if he could help it, to say nothing of his feeling that the enterprise he had in hand for Matthew Thorne was not to be made public property.

Securing the door that communicated with the tunnel, which, as we know, afforded egress by way of the island in the lake, Peachblossom stopped a moment to stroke the neck of the chestnut-brown horse standing alone in the stable, and then retraced his steps to the dining-room with his two companions.

"Bill, put up the ladder to the trap-door above. Tony and his wife are going to get some

sleep. You and I will have to work for an hour or so."

"All right, Cap."

The ladder was soon in its place, and Tony held it for his wife to ascend.

She stepped upon the bottom rung, her rifle still slung over her shoulder, and her cheeks flushed with excitement, in spite of her fatigue. Then she stopped, and looked in the faces of the detective and Tony in turn.

She seemed to be troubled about something. Suddenly she exclaimed:

"Mr. Grattan, do you think I am too hard upon Tony?"

Peachblossom smiled as he replied:

"I think you are, occasionally."

"Tony," she cried, imperiously. "Come here."

The little showman obediently stepped close to his better-half, and she, with a little sob, threw her arms around his neck, at the imminent hazard of falling from the ladder, and kissed him until he gasped again.

"Now," she went on. "Don't let any one say that I am hard on Tony. I have to keep him in order, and sometimes it is necessary to speak sharply to him. But I know, all the same, that he is the dearest, sweetest, smartest, handsomest man in the world. There!"

Another hard kiss upon the lips of the breathless Tony almost knocked him down. Then, with a glance of triumph at Peachblossom, the impulsive little woman had slipped up the ladder and disappeared through the trap into the bedroom.

Tony had been blushing furiously throughout his wife's address, and when she piled up the superlatives he seemed as if he did not know in which way to look.

Now, that he was gone, he recovered somewhat from the spell, and grew an inch or two taller before the very eyes of Peachblossom and Red Bill.

"Joe, what d'ye think of that for a wife, eh? Ain't she a daisy? Eh? Ain't she, Bill? I tell you what I am going to do when we get back to Chicago. I am going to get some one to write a drama fer her, and if she does not make a star that will knock out Clara Morris or Fanny Davenport, then tell me I do not know talent when I see it. She's a daisy, that's what she is, and I would rather be hollered at by her than praised by any other woman on earth."

With these words, delivered with the utmost solemnity, and evidently coming directly from the heart, Tony marched up the ladder with a stately tread, and going through the trap shut down the heavy trap-door and fastened it on the inside.

The detective smiled, as he heard Tony walking about up-stairs. He knew that the married couple would not quarrel for a few hours at least, for both were so sleepy that they would be unconscious until somebody awoke them.

"Now, Bill, what did you find in there?" he asked, in a business-like way.

"Nothing, particular, except this."

It was a Winchester rifle that Bill held toward the detective with one hand, while in his other he held a cartridge belt, full all around.

The detective strapped on the cartridge belt under his Prince Albert coat, with a sigh that he could not repress as he saw that, even with this precaution, the belt would not add to the beauty of his clothing.

He had noticed a brush hanging against the wall by the side of a small mirror, in company with a small shelf upon which was hairpins, curl-papers and other accessories to feminine adornment. He took the brush in his hand, and after brushing himself as far he could reach, gave the brush to Red Bill, to finish the operation.

The latter was used to Peachblossom's ways, and was just as ready to act as *valet-de-chamber* as to fight with guns and pistols by the side of his chief.

"What are we going to do now, Cap?" asked Bill, industriously whisking away at the detective's coat.

"Go down-stairs," was the sententious answer.

"Why?"

"Brush, brush, brush! Whisk, whisk, whisk!"

"To look for—"

"What?"

Red Bill was so interested in the detective's words that he actually forgot himself sufficiently to interject a "what" when it was entirely superfluous.

"To look for—"

Another interruption, but not from Red Bill this time.

The ominous click of a revolver that for some reason had missed fire but that was as unmistakable as if the shot had been fired with a tremendous report.

With one jump the detective had gained the door shutting off the sloping passage leading to the stables.

It was closed and fastened on the other side! Peachblossom tugged at it with all his strength, but without avail. Then, drawing his bowie, he went vigorously to work to force back the bolts, as he heard rapidly retreating footsteps in the passage on the other side.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE TRAIL OF THE TREASURE.

"CONFOUND this door! I must break it down by main strength, I am afraid," exclaimed the detective, as he tried in vain to catch the lock with his bowie.

"All right, Cap."

Red Bill was at his elbow with an ax, that he had seen among a quantity of lumber in the other room, but that he did not consider worthy of mention until just such an implement was needed.

"Hit the lock, Bill. We do not want to smash the door all to pieces, if we can avoid it."

"All right, Cap."

Two or three carefully delivered blows, and the door gave way.

The detective darted forward, followed by his lieutenant. Whoever was in the passage could not have gone very far, especially when the door on the other side of the stable had been shut, and would have to be opened, perhaps with some difficulty by the person who seemed so anxious to get away.

It was not a very wise thing, perhaps, for Peachblossom and Red Bill to expose themselves to the fire of a lurking foe by running into the dark from a lighted room; but Peachblossom for once allowed his enthusiasm to get the better of his prudence. As it chanced, the recklessness of the detective was not attended by any evil consequences.

The stable gained, the door that he had lately closed and fastened was wide open, indicating clearly that the unknown had gone this way.

Running swiftly along the tunnel, with Red Bill at his heels, the detective tried to see as far ahead as he could by means of the small lantern that he still carried in his hand.

Along they went some distance, and then, after making some of the turns that they met with in the tunnel, the detective stopped to listen.

He had heard the lopping of the water over his head, and had noticed the trickling of this stream upon the walls, which were referred to when describing the progress of Mad Sharp and his daughter through the tunnel.

"I wonder what this means?" observed Peachblossom.

"Water," was Red Bill's explanation, given in all seriousness.

"Yes, I see that it is water, but how does it come down here?"

"Something leaks, I guess."

Red Bill did not wish to delve very deeply into the matter. His idea was that so long as the course of the water flowing down was apparent, there was no use in searching for more details.

In which, it maybe said, Red Bill resembled a great many easy-going persons to be met with every day, and in other parts of the country than Colorado.

Peachblossom was not so easily satisfied, however.

"I believe this means treachery, Bill," he remarked, speaking more to himself than to his companions. He was accustomed to placing more reliance upon Bill's muscle and animal courage than upon his brain.

"Think so?" responded Red Bill, carelessly.

"Yes. Come along! Follow me!"

"That's what I calculate ter do, every time." Red Bill seemed to think the detective's admonition unnecessary, and he was evidently a little hurt by it, though he recognized that this was neither the time or place to say so. Therefore, he kept closely at Peachblossom's heels, and was ready for anything that might turn up.

Meantime, he noticed, as did the detective, that the sound of the water was becoming plainer and plainer, and that there were bigger streams than ever pouring down the walls.

A door, and fastened! It was that communicating with the pit, by which egress could be made to the lake overhead.

"What is on the other side of that door, I wonder," muttered the detective. "I will see this business through now that I have commenced on it."

He shook the door, but only slightly, for it was almost as firm as the rock itself.

"Now, Bill."

Red Bill, who had brought his ax with him, understood the admonition. He attacked the door with the ax with all his strength.

Somewhat to his surprise, he could not make any impression on it. The ax rebounded at every blow, as if the door had been of thrice-tempered steel.

He was gathering all his strength for a terrific smash at the door, when, to his horror, the door slowly swung open of its own accord, while a harsh voice in his very ear, whispered some unintelligible sounds with a fierceness that, in that dark, noisome place, seemed to Bill to be diabolical.

He dropped the ax and turned around with his rifle ready for instant action.

"What's the matter, Bill?"

The calm tones of Peachblossom restored him to himself at once.

"Did yer hear it?"

"Hear it? What?"

"Some one spoke," said Bill, solemnly, although without any terror, for he had nerves of iron,

and was not the man to be frightened even by a ghost for more than a second or two.

"Suppose some one did speak. I told you to break open that door, and you did it."

The detective entered the pit and looked up. He saw the long plank lying against the wall, and his quick wit explained the use of it at once.

"Bill, pick up that piece of wood, and lean it against the top of the wall."

No sooner done than the detective ran up the inclined path thus made and looked out.

"A very pretty arrangement indeed," he quietly remarked. "I am beginning to learn a great deal about Mr. Mad Sharp that I never understood before."

He turned to come down, when he heard a scuffling, and before he knew what had happened, the door leading to the tunnel shut with a bang.

To leap down the plank and throw himself against the door was the work of an instant.

To his surprise, the door gave way and allowed him to tumble, all of a heap, inside the tunnel. He was on his feet almost before he had fallen, and then he found himself in the grip of a man who had seized him from behind.

As we have already said, the Drummer Detective was a powerful man, in spite of his fondness for neat attire and cleanliness. He grappled with his unknown assailant, and putting into practice certain wrestling tricks that had served him on some previous occasions, he was slowly forcing the stranger backward, when, with a swish a mass of water came pouring into the pit, and striking him full in the face, completely bewildered him.

He fell backward; his foe tore himself away, and the detective found himself in the arms of Red Bill, while the clanging of an iron door told them that they had been trapped again.

"Wal, whar in thunderation are we now?" growled Red Bill.

"I do not know, Bill, but I do know that I am wet and cold. Wait till I get a light, so that we can look at our surroundings."

The little lantern that, attached to his vest by a chain, was always sure to be somewhere about the detective's form, was turned on, almost the first thing brought into view by it being a lamp hung from the low ceiling.

The lamp lighted, the two prisoners saw that they were in a workshop of some kind. There was a forge, a smelting furnace on a small scale, some lead ingots, some molds, a bag of silver, and a smaller one of gold-dust.

"So this is Mad Sharp's business, is it?" muttered the detective. "And his cattle business on the other side of Pueblo is a blind. Aha! Well, I am not sorry that I have been shoved in here, because I have all the evidence I want if I ever get out alive, as I mean to. My trip to Bobson's Corners will enable me to do other important work besides that I have in hand for old Matthew Thorne."

"Who wuz ther feller ez took such liberties with us, Cap? He took me foul, and hed me in hyar afore I knew what hit me. Ther next minute you come tumblin' in, and hyar we air!"

The comical air of astonishment with which Red Bill said this, made the detective burst into an involuntary peal of laughter.

A banging on the other side of the door followed.

"See thar, Cap. We must not laugh," observed Red Bill, shaking his fist at the door.

Peachblossom did not reply. He was busy. The water that had been dashed in his face had wetted him down to the waist, and had completely destroyed his last hope of making anything like a presentable appearance unless he could find some means of drying himself.

This means he saw ready to his hand. He lighted the fire in the smelting furnace, and ten minutes later had removed his clothing from the upper part of his person and hung it to dry near the fire.

As he stood there, bare from the waistband up, he looked a very Apollo, except that the muscles moving sinuously beneath the white skin, as he raised his arms occasionally for exercise, indicated a dash of the Hercules.

On the other side of the door was the mysterious assailant of the detective and his lieutenant, whose identity will be easily guessed by the reader.

It was Bull Worth!

Just now he was spying through a small hole in the door, about the height of an ordinary-sized man's eye, supposing the man to be standing upright.

There was a grin of malicious triumph that uncovered his yellow teeth, and his goggle eyes twinkled as he saw that he had got the Drummer Detective in a situation where it would be easy to dispose of him without the outer world being a bit the wiser.

"I could finish him off now if I wanted to," he muttered. "But I suppose I must wait till ther old man comes. Wal, now that I hev er chance I b'lieve I'll see what I kin do about this hyar dust. I don't think thar is much fear uv Joe Grattan or Bill a-comin' out uv their bud-dore till I say so."

Carefully pulling down the plank and fasten-

ing the door leading to the pit, he walked back through the tunnel till he reached the stable.

Here he paused for a few moments, and, lighting a match, stood and looked about him till the match burned his fingers and went out.

"Durn it! I'll hev ter git a light I s'pose."

He went up to the dining-room, where the large lamp was blazing away, and throwing a cheerful gleam over the comfortable, home-like room.

He looked about to see that he was quite alone. For though he knew that Mr. and Mrs. Black were on the ranch he did not trouble about them. If he had thought of them at all he would have supposed them fast asleep in their room up-stairs. As it was he did not think about them any more than he did about the King of the Cannibal Islands, or any other remote personage.

"Now for it."

He took from his pocket the dirty old chart that he had stolen from the dead body of the old Matthew Thorne, together with the notebook that he had secured at the same time and put them upon the table before him.

For a few moments he gloated over his possessions. Then he spread out the chart, and with the open book before him, followed with his finger certain lines in the map.

"Yes, yes. Thar it is. Thar is the southwest corner of the lake. Thar is ther island standin' off from it, with ther ranch on it. All complete and reg'lar. By Jones, old Thorne knew how ter get up these hyar things. It's er pity ther old man won't never git no benefit from ther s'arch."

He grinned disagreeably as he made this reflection. A man that can enjoy thinking of a murder that he has committed is not likely to be a very pleasant individual.

"Now, let me turn to the next page. Ah, yes. Hyar it is. Here is what it sez: 'Having found ther island, hyar is a plan of ther ranch.' Um! Um! Hyar's ther three rooms down-stairs. So! Then hyar's ther way to ther stables. Hyar's ther stables themselves, and hyar's— Why? How's this hyar?"

He was now so deeply interested in the plan and the notes that explained it that a pistol shot might almost have been discharged at his ear without his hearing it.

His finger was traveling nervously over the chart, following the lines closely, while his goggle eyes were almost starting out of his head in his eagerness.

"Yes, yes. Thar's no mistake 'bout it. That's jist whar it is, sure!"

Had not Bull Worth been so very intent upon his investigations, he might have known that there was somebody snoring in the room on his left—that opposite the stables. The door was closed; but now, as Bull bent lower over his chart, and concentrated all his attention upon it, the door slowly opened and a pair of eyes were fixed upon him curiously. The owner of the eyes held a revolver in his right hand, the fingers of which twitched as if anxious to press the trigger.

"So! It's thar, is it?" went on Bull Worth, reflectively, passing his finger backward and forward over a certain spot on the chart.

Still with one finger on the chart, he raised his right fist, brought it down ponderously upon the table, and exclaimed:

"Thar is only one thing ter do, an' thet is, ter kill—"

"Who?"

The word came out clear and sharp from the lips of the person who had entered the room, revolver in hand.

Hastily snatching up the chart and note-book with his left hand, Bull Worth made a motion as if he would draw a weapon. A slight raising of the revolver, so that the desperado could look down the barrel by way of the muzzle, made Bull throw up his hands in token of surrender, while his parched lips contracted painfully as from between them came a whisper:

"Mad Sharp!"

CHAPTER XIX.

BOBSON'S SWIM IN THE DARK.

THE reader will be curious to know how Mad Sharp managed to escape from the boat in which he was, to all appearance, so securely held a prisoner, so we will suspend the direct course of the narrative for a few minutes to review the operations of the old man when he found himself so completely in the power of Red Bill, and Tony and Amelia Black.

When Amelia appeared so opportunely for Bill and her husband, Zed Bobson, it will be remembered, got away in the confusion.

The proprietor of Bobson's Hotel was the kind of man who always looks after himself, and who seldom allows his own safety and convenience to be imperiled for the sake of other people—when he can help it.

"Cuss that showman and his wife!" he hissed, as he broke away from Tony and reached a thicket in which he had left the horse that had brought him from the village of Bobson's Corners to the valley.

He had left the horse untethered, knowing him to be a docile animal, that would not be

likely to move before his master returned. On this occasion, however, the horse had not sustained his reputation for steadiness, unless, indeed, he had been led away by some one.

"That couldn't be," reflected Bobson. "Thar ain't nobody in the valley only what I knows on, and none uv them couldn't hev interfered."

He kept in the shadow of the pines, thinking to himself that he could easily recover the horse in the daylight. At present, with all the plotting and fighting going on under cover of the night, Mr. Bobson considered that his main duty was to keep himself out of personal danger as well as he could.

He could just make out, from his position behind a gigantic tree, where he could look out without taking great risks of a stray shot that Mad Sharp had been lifted into the wide, flat boat in which he and his companion had rowed down from the spot where Marie had forcibly taken her mare from him.

"Ther old man's evidently out uv his senses now. Thet durned woman must ha' given him er terrible hard swipe, sure enough. He likes ter say ez I'm too fresh. Wal, wonder whether he won't think 'Mealy Black is fresher than me, when he wakes up so ez he kin think about anything!'"

He grinned malevolently, and watched the boat push off, with Mad lying in the bottom out of sight. The little light that always exists over the water, and to which the few stars in the sky contributed, enabled him to distinguish the movements of the voyagers in a general way.

"S'pose I must try an' git him out uv his snarl ef I want ter keep solid with Marie, as well as ther old man. Ah, my gal, ef you knew what er hold I hev over him, you wouldn't be so mighty disdainful of Zed Bobson. Mark that!"

Thus mumbling to himself, Bobson came from behind his protecting tree, and walked swiftly toward the spot from which Mad Sharp had been taken, a prisoner, in the flat-bottomed row-boat.

Lying down, he scanned the surface of the lake, and could just discern the three figures in the boat, as the craft skimmed along in response to the oars of Red Bill.

"So, they are going toward the ranch. Wonder what thar game is. S'pose they think he hes thet durned detective in ther house. Which is right so fur ez it goes, fur ther old man almost let drop something to thet effect ter me."

Bobson was thinking deeply.

He had come to the valley to warn Mad Sharp of impending danger, not because he loved the old man personally, nor because he would not have been quite willing to be present at his funeral, but because he could not afford to have the proprietor of this ranch in the valley killed, while it could be prevented easily.

Zed Bobson knew enough about Mad Sharp to send him to State Prison for the rest of his life, but with a cunning for which even the old man, keen as he was, was no match, had managed so far to get a large share of the proceeds of the bogus money business without rendering himself amenable to the law.

There was still another reason why Zed Bobson was disposed to stand by Mad Sharp: He loved Marie Sharpe as earnestly as his nature would allow. Certainly, the girl bestowed upon him about equal measure of hatred and ridicule, but he knew—or thought he knew—that patience would win the day for him. In the mean time, if he could only play upon her gratitude, he thought that would be as good a card as he could use.

"Now, ef I could git ther old man out uv thet 'ithout her knowin' nothin' 'bout it till afterward, she'd think thar wuz somethin' in Zed Bobson after all."

The idea gave fresh strength to his lanky limbs, and his meager form straightened up until it had reached its full height, which was not very startling, however.

He had stood still while thinking, but now he darted forward as if he had entered for a foot-race, with his rifle resting on the hollow of his left arm, and his right swinging freely in unison with his gait.

Ten minutes of the loping trot he had fallen into took him so far along the bank that he could see the boat not more than two hundred yards from him, bearing straight toward that part of the lake in which was the island with the ranch at the back of it.

He got as nearly opposite the island as he could, and waited for developments.

"Whar is Marie, I wonder?" he muttered. "I thought I should hev come across her somewhar hyar. She couldn't hev gone 'cross ter ther island, I should think. Ther old man told her to stay hyar, an' she generally does ez he sez."

"Bobson!"

"Yes, Mar—I mean, Miss Marie," he exclaimed, as he hastily stopped himself from addressing her in the familiar way to which she had before so forcibly objected.

The girl had ridden quietly up behind him on her dappled gray, still holding Demon by the leading rein, and as cool and unconcerned as if she had been taking a canter for pleasure in the bright sunlight instead of waiting while her father engaged in a desperate adventure.

She did not know as yet that he had been

made a prisoner, as was evidenced by her next query:

"Bobson, whar is dad?"

Bobson pointed across the dark water.

"What do yer mean?"

"You asked for yer dad, didn't yer?"

"Yes."

"Wal, he's thar."

"Thar?"

"Yes."

"In ther boat?"

"Yes."

"Whar is—is—ther folks ez he went ter see?"

"With him."

"With him?"

"Yes."

Bobson answered her in this monosyllabic manner because he enjoyed talking to Marie, for one thing. Another reason was that he wanted to collect his thoughts before he told her the truth.

Bang! Bang!

The shots fired at Peachblossom when he took off his coat and showed his white shirt sleeves against the blackness of the ranch, reverberated across the lake.

"What are those?" asked Marie, anxiously.

"Shots."

This short answer nearly cost Bobson a cut from the riding-whip that hung at the pommel of the girl's saddle. Had the whip been in her hand she would undoubtedly have used it. She controlled her indignation with an effort, and asked:

"Who fired them, do you think?"

"I dunno."

"Was it dad?"

"I don't think so."

"Why don't you think so?"

The girl felt that Bobson had the best of her now because he knew something that she was anxious to find out, but she made a mental resolution to make him suffer at some future time.

"Your father is a prisoner in the bottom of that boat," answered Bobson, slowly and distinctly.

He would have liked to keep the knowledge from her until he had rescued the old man somehow, but Marie was too persistent to enable him to carry out such an intention.

"A prisoner?"

"Yes."

"And you let them take him prisoner?"

"I couldn't help it."

"You couldn't help it?" repeated the girl, contemptuously. "No, I suppose not."

This was rather unjust to poor Bobson, who had done all he could, and had really had his hands full with Tony Black when Mad had been stretched senseless. But the girl did not like Bobson, and she was only too glad of an opportunity of impressing that fact upon him.

"Who are those people in the boat?" she demanded, through her set teeth.

"Well, there's Red Bill, Tony Black and his wife."

"His wife? What—Amelia?"

"Yes."

"But she ain't got nothing against dad, hez she? Nor Tony neither, eh?"

"Not ez I knows on. But, yer see, this hyar Red Bill is er pal uv ther Drummer Detective, ez they call thet thar dude what you see'd sneakin' around ther hotel yesterday."

"Well?"

"An' Red Bill got it inter his head ez Mad wuz er-doin' somethin' to him—I mean, ther detective."

"Well?"

"So he said ez how he would come an' lay out Mad, an' rescue the detective. Then he asked Tony ef he felt like helpin' in ther job, an' Tony said yes."

"Well?"

"Wal, I happened ter be around ther tent when Tony an' Bill wuz er-talkin' 'bout comin' hyar an' makin' things lively fer Mad, an' I come too, 'thout them knowin' anything 'bout it. I give ther signal ter ther old man, as you know, an' just now we went down ter ther east end uv ther valley, an' we'd ka' made it pleasant fer ther two men when that cussed wife uv Tony's who hed taken it inter her head ter come too, hit's ther old man a belt on ther head with her rifle, an' knocks him senseless."

"She did?" hissed Marie, as her hand tightened on the lock of her rifle.

"Thet's what she did!"

"And what did you do?"

Bobson could see by the starlight that the eyes of the girl were ablaze.

"What did I do?" hesitated Bobson.

"Yes. Tell me. Did yer help my dad, or did yer sneak away an' let him fight his way out by himself?"

The girl was fingering the trigger of her Winchester in a way that Bobson did not like. As he expressed it afterward, he "wuz afraid ther blamed thing might go off."

"Hurry up, now. Tell me what you did?" reiterated Marie.

"Wal, I didn't sneak away. But I see a chance ter git out uv ther clutches uv that thar durned Tony Black, an' I took ther chance."

"Of course ye did, I might have knowed it."

"Wal, what wuz I ter do?" retorted Bobson, rendered desperate by the girl's cool contempt. "Ther old man was tied up an' laid in ther bottom uv ther boat, an' thar wuz three ag'in one. But I'll git him out ov it now ef you'll give me er show."

"How?"

"I'll go over ter that boat an' watch for 'em ter leave him alone er minute. Them shots jist now show that thar is either a ruction with some one else goin' on, or else ther old man hez managed ter git back his senses an' is givin' 'em er shot or two. Anyhow, I'll go an' see."

"How will you get over thar? You tell me my canoe is smashed, and ther only other boat 'side ther one they are in is lyin' in ther dock at ther island by the side of 'em."

Stung to the quick by Marie's words, Bobson without a word, put his Winchester into her hand, she taking it mechanically, and wondering what was coming next. Then he hastily threw off his coat, kicked off his boots, and drawing one of his revolvers, gave that also to Marie.

"What are yer goin' ter do now?" asked the girl.

"Nothing. I'm goin' ter sneak away, ez I allers do," replied Bobson, bitterly.

He drew his remaining pistol, and holding it high above his head, so that it should not get wet, if he could prevent it, plunged into the lake.

He was a strong swimmer, and lying on his left side, with the revolver high out of the water in his right hand, he pushed rapidly for the flat-bottomed boat in the darkness.

As he neared it he heard the voices of the people on shore around the ranch, and also made out that there was no one in the boat except Mad Sharp, whom he expected to find lying in the bottom.

A moment later his expectation was verified, for he found the old man, so tightly bound that he was immovable, flat on his back, gazing benevolently up at the stars, and looking like a patriarchal saint awaiting martyrdom.

A few cuts of Bobson's bowie released the old man from his bonds, and Mad sat up, stretching his arms and preparing for a struggle with any foe that might face him.

Red Bill had not troubled himself to disarm the prisoner, so Mad Sharp had the satisfaction of finding his revolvers still in their sheaths.

"Look out, they're comin'."

"Let 'em come! I'm ready for 'em," declared the old man, fiercely, although there was no indication of rage in the placid face or mild blue eyes.

"No, not now. We kin get into 'em easily in the house, an' what's ther use uv yer takin' any risk? 'Sides, Marie is waitin' fer yer over thar an' she's skeered 'bout yer."

This last speech seemed to change the old man's resolution. He turned to the head of the boat to unfasten the rope.

"Hurry up! They're hyar!" admonished Bobson.

"Cuss this thing! I can't get it untied!"

"Let me cut it."

"No! It's too late."

Mad Sharp and Bobson scrambled out of the boat together, and running along in a stooping position for several yards, reached the other boat that was lying in the dock, without being observed, just as Tony, Red Bill and the others got to the flat-bottomed boat to find the prisoner gone.

Twenty minutes later Mad Sharp was on his black horse Demon, by the side of Marie.

With Bobson walking by their side, they made their way to a certain locality from which it would be possible to reach the island almost dry-shod, there being just one shallow place in the lake, known only to these three persons.

CHAPTER XX.

A QUEER HOUSEHOLD.

LET us get back to the ranch.

"What hev yer got thar?" demanded Mad Sharp of Bull Worth, when he had enjoyed the latter's discomfiture for a few minutes, never taking his eyes from the note-book and chart that was still clutched in the upraised, trembling hand.

"Notbin' in particular. Jist some letters from—from—my gal."

"You lie!"

Bull Worth's hand moved as if it would go to his belt, but the old man had the drop on him, and he had to swallow the insult.

"I told yer yer lied, Bull, an' I knew what I wuz er-talkin' about. Let me see them papers."

"Halloa, dad! What's ther fun?"

Marie burst into the room, closely followed by the devoted Bobson.

"Notbin', my gal. Get ter bed."

"I won't git ter bed till I've hed some supper. 'Sides, I want ter know who is in ther house first. What are yer doin' ter thet thing with ther rocky teeth an' ther pebble eyes?"

The naturally high spirits of the girl asserted themselves whenever actual danger and annoyance were absent.

Bull Worth looked at her as if he would have liked to wring her neck, which perhaps he would

if he could have done so without danger to himself.

The next moment he could have hugged her in the extremity of his joy, for she seized her father playfully by the shoulders and swung him around so that his back was turned toward Bull for a very few seconds.

Those very few seconds afforded him an opportunity that he had hardly dared hope for. Like a flash he stuffed the chart and note-book in one pocket, and drew out a piece of crumpled paper and another note-book of no value, that might easily be mistaken for the others.

Mad Sharp, who could never be cross with his daughter, whatever pranks she played, kissed her and released himself, turning again to Bull Worth.

"Give me thet paper in yer hand. Ef it don't consarn me I'll give it back ag'in. Ef it is anything ter do with me, why, yer can't complain ef I keep it."

Bull Worth did not condescend to reply. He simply handed the paper and note-book to the old man, who looked at them, and then, with a careless laugh, handed them back.

"By gracious, you're right, Bull. They don't amount to nothin'. But I wonder why yer were lookin' over thet old letter now. You must be love-sick over thet thar gal in Chicago, eh?"

"Ef I am, it's my own bizness, I s'pose," replied Bull, sullenly.

"Thet drummer feller all safe?" asked the old man, ignoring Bull's last remark.

"All safe."

"Good! Now, thar may be trouble in ther morning, but I don't think that ought ter prevent us gettin' a little sleep now, eh, Marie?"

Mad Sharp knew that his ranch was practically impregnable, and though fully aware that Red Bill and others were in the valley, and that they would doubtless stay in the vicinity of the ranch for the rest of the night, he went about his regular preparations for retiring as coolly as if there had not been an enemy within a thousand miles of him.

"Mr. Bobson got wet, dad," said Marie, mischievously.

Bobson tried to look injured, but he only succeeded in making himself ridiculous—at least, in the eyes of Marie Sharpe—as he turned a languishing glance in her direction, and seemed to be beseeching sympathy.

The girl had lighted a fire in the stove, and was now making coffee and preparing ham and eggs for a meal very much like that at which Peachblossom had assisted the night before. Though it was now within a few hours of breakfast-time, everybody that smelled the coffee and savory ham felt disposed to do justice to the viands even if it was four o'clock in the morning.

Bobson, who really felt that he was a badly-used, unappreciated individual, stood close to the stove in the hope of drying his clothes, and was soon enveloped in a cloud of steam that not only rendered him invisible, but filled the whole room with an unpleasant dampness.

"Bobson, I think you'd better go up-stairs, and put on er suit uv my clothes," suggested Mad, with a chuckle, as he stretched himself comfortably in his particular arm-chair near the stove, with his back against the wall. This habit of sitting with his back against the wall was the natural outcome of a wild life. He felt safe as long as no one could get behind him, and he always sat in that way, even when no one but his daughter was present.

"Thar's er suit uv yer togs in thet closet in ther next room. Why can't Mr. Bobson put them on?" suggested Marie.

"Thet's so. Bobson, go an' git inter them. You'll find 'em whar Marie told yer. Hyar, take er candle, so ez you kin see."

Bobson obediently lighted the candle toward which Mad Sharp pointed, and went into the next room.

"Thar ain't nothin' in any uv them pockets, Zed, so I ain't 'fraid uv yer gittin' the best uv me in ther deal," shouted the old man, with a chuckle.

Bobson did not answer. He was busy examining the clothes that he was to wear.

For perhaps ten minutes he remained in the other room, while Marie spread the table. Mad Sharp pulled away at a very black clay pipe, and Bull Worth, in a corner, sat with his long legs drawn up in front of him, and appeared to be lost in thought.

"Oh, dad, look at this!"

Marie clapped her hands with delight and pointed to the doorway.

Mad Sharp burst into a loud laugh, as he saw the ludicrous object entering the dining-room.

Bobson had dressed himself in the old man's clothes, and it was really doubtful in which corner of them he was hidden. With the trousers hanging baggily about him, turned up at the bottoms; with the woolen shirt and heavy coat showing that they could have held two men of his size, and with the broad sombrero overshadowing his face and wriggling from side to side, Zed Bobson presented a most forlorn appearance.

"Halloa, Zed, air ye dressed?" asked Mad, banteringly.

"Yes; thanks to your kindness," answered Bobson, as he tried to keep the large hat from shutting off his vision.

"My kindness, eh? Ha, ha, ha!"

Mad Sharp was in a good humor. The meal prepared by his daughter, and now tastefully arranged on the table, was enough to dispel any amount of ill-temper, especially in a hungry man. He therefore gave Bobson a hearty slap on the back that almost dislocated his spine, and invited him to sit down and enjoy himself.

"By the way, Bull, how's the Drummer?" asked Mad, when for fifteen minutes or so everybody had been paying exclusive attention to the business of the table.

A grin, in which there was, however, a hint of apprehension, overspread Bull Worth's ugly face.

"The Drummer?" he repeated.

"That's what I said. What is he?"

"I don't know."

"What?" yelled Mad Sharp, starting to his feet, while his hand flew to his belt. "Yer don't know? An' I left him in your charge, with strict orders ez yer should keep yer eye on him. An' now yer hev the cheek ter tell me that yer don't know whar he is. Who's up thar in that room?"

Bull Worth had arisen at the same instant as the old man, but he only stood against the wall, without offering to defend himself from Mad Sharp's storm of indignation.

For once the placid look had died out of the face of the latter, and there was nothing of the saint in his appearance save the patriarchal beard and white hair.

"Who's in the room over our heads?" howled Mad Sharp again.

"Tony and Amelia Black, the show people. That's who it is," said Bull Worth, sullenly.

The ladder was still in its place, leaning against the trap. Pistol in hand Mad Sharp sprang upon it and ran to the top. He pushed with all his force against the trap door, but could not move it. He did not waste his time over an impossibility, but running down disappeared into the other room.

"Now for fun!" muttered Bull, as he waited for the next demonstration from up-stairs.

It came sooner than he expected.

Suddenly the door over his head was forcibly pulled up, and the next instant Mad Sharp came sliding down the ladder in a heap.

With a bound he had reached Bull, and seizing him by the throat, shook him until his head knocked against the wall with a sound like the emptying of a wagon-load of cobblestones.

"Dad!" cried Marie, stepping to her father's side and trying to pull him away from his victim.

But Mad Sharp, although he retained his calm expression by a tremendous effort, was in too deep a passion to pay any attention to his daughter or her remonstrances.

"You infernal liar!" he hissed, as he gave Bull an extra shake that made the wall ring again.

"What's—what's the matter?" stammered Bull.

"The matter is that yer lied ter me," replied Mad, as, with one mighty twist and push, he sent the lanky villain flying to the furthest corner of the room, where he lay in a disgruntled heap.

"Lied to yer?" he gasped.

"Yes, lied ter me? *That ain't no one thar!*"

Bull Worth's goggle eyes started in a way that left no doubt of his utter surprise at this information. Had he not seen the little showman and his wife go up the ladder, and did he not know, or think, that they had no chance to escape without his being made aware of it?

Yet here was the room empty, the trap above fastened, and apparently no means of getting away.

"Do yer mean ter say ez they was up there, or were yer drunk?" demanded the old man.

"I wasn't drunk, an' I see'd 'em go up."

"Wal, wal, they come down, thet's sart'in," observed Mad, after a pause. "Mebbe you're tellin' the truth, an' ef yer are, we'll have ter watch a little closer than we expected, thet's all."

The old man went up the ladder again, noted that everything was secure, and then, without speaking, motioned to Marie to come up to him.

She obeyed, with her rifle in her hand.

She knew her father's ways, and she would not have been at all surprised, to find that she had to use her weapon, in spite of the calmness of his manner when he summoned her to his side. She had seen more wild adventures in her short life than would fall to the lot of an Eastern maiden in a hundred years or more.

But there was nothing for her to do but to go to bed. Now that her father was assured that both rooms were empty he wanted her to get some rest, and to make sure of it he had called her up-stairs.

"I ain't very tired, dad," she remonstrated, for she did not like to be packed off to bed in this off-hand way, and she really spoke the truth. She had been up so long and had become so thoroughly worn out that she had got

past the stage in which she realized the extent of her own fatigue.

"Never mind, my gal. You go ter bed. I'm goin' inter the next room myself to get a few hours' snooze."

"What 'bout Bull Worth an'—an'—she had to stop and laugh before she could go on—"an' Bobson?"

She did not like Bobson, but still, when she thought of his ridiculous figure in her father's clothes she could not refrain from a ripple of girlish mirth that sounded very sweet and silvery amid her rough surroundings.

Her father smiled too, and as he looked down the hole at the unconscious Bobson, who was standing by the stove, trying to keep the sleeves of his rough coat from falling over his hands, his mild, blue eyes sparkled with a holy light. He might have been about to bestow his blessing upon the owner of Bobson's Hotel, Bobson's Corners.

That was not his intention, however, for, still smiling, he suddenly shut down the trap and fastened it securely.

"Good night, Marie. Go to bed, and stay thar till I call yer. No one kin git in ter yer 'thout disturbin' me, an' I guess I kin take care on yer."

"But, father, ain't things kind o' mixed up in the ranch? Whar do yer s'pose the Drummer is—an' Tony an' Melia? 'Seems ter me thet half the population uv Bobson's Corners is makin' free in the house now."

"Thet's all right. They kin stay hyar till I'm ready ter go an' see 'em. They can't get out uv the house 'cept through one uv these hyar two rooms, an' I'll tend ter them."

"But the passage through the stables?"

"They'll never find their way thar. 'Sides, thar's one or two doors in the way."

"Praps so, dad. But they must all be down thar somewhar, 'cause they ain't in the other part uv the house. An' they might come across some uv your private bizness, mightn't they?"

"Ef they do, it will be the last thing ez they will know," replied the old man, as an angry gleam shot from his blue eyes. "They'll never hev no chance ter talk 'bout it outside. Good-night."

The old man stalked through the doorway, closed the door, and kicking off his heavy boots, threw himself upon the cot, with his rifle by his side, and in five minutes was sleeping as peacefully as a child.

CHAPTER XVI.

MARIE IN THE POWER OF AN UNKNOWN.

THE closing of the trap overhead, and the prolonged absence of Mad Sharp did not particularly surprise the two men in the dining-room.

But Bobson and Bullard Worth knew that Mad had funny ways, and when, after some thirty minutes he did not return, they made up their minds that he had gone quietly to bed, without troubling himself to give them any notice of his intention.

Bull and Bobson were not warm friends, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, but, thrown together as they were, they managed to be civil to each other.

"Old man's gone to bed, eh?" observed Bull, stepping toward the stove.

"Guess so. S'pose he'll stay thar fer a few hours. Wal, I'm tired, too. I'll lay down here by the side uv the stove an' take er snooze fer er few hours."

"Good idee! I'll do the same."

It was warm and comfortable in the dining-room. There was a good fire in the stove, and it was no wonder that the occupants of the apartment were disposed to sleep after their many hours of wakefulness and adventure. Bull had slept a little in the train and in the wagon the night before, and Bobson had had his usual night's rest at his hotel. But for nearly twenty-four hours both had been continually on the move and were now nearly worn out.

Pulling their coats around them, they lay down on either side of the stove, each wrapped in his own thoughts.

Bull was wondering how Peachblossom and Red Bill were getting along in the secret room among the paraphernalia of Mad Sharp's private business—the furnace, the molds, and so forth, and was giving a few surmises as to where Tony and his wife had gone, and what was their game in disappearing so mysteriously. In spite of Mad Sharp's suspicions, Bull really did not know where the showman and his wife had betaken themselves. He could only make up his mind that they were somewhere in the house, but what they were about he had no idea. He did not trouble his head very much about them however. He did not think that they were able to do much harm, even if they had the will, and he had no fear of their stumbling upon the well-guarded little room in which the Drummer Detective and his henchman were concealed.

As for Bobson, he had plenty to think about. The cavalier manner in which he had been treated by Mad Sharp; the ridicule of Marie, the dangerous situation in which he felt the old man now was, with so many people on the ranch evidently hunting him down for some purpose;

the probability of him (Bobson) being drawn into it, and finally, the likelihood of Bull Worth playing some trick for his own benefit as soon as he thought Bobson was asleep, were matters that kept on chasing through his brain, banished sleep, and made him wish that he were comfortably in his bed in Bobson's Hotel.

Both men tossed and tumbled uncomfortably as time passed, and each wondered what the other was thinking about.

"Bull!"

"Wal?"

"Asleep?"

"Not much!"

"Think yer will go ter sleep soon?"

"Why?"

"Oh, nothing."

There was a pause for a few minutes, and then Bull Worth spoke:

"What did yer ask me thet question fer?"

"Wal, I thought p'raps ef yer couldn't sleep we might hev a game er keards."

Bull Worth without a word, arose, poked up the fire, and taking a pack of cards from the closet where, as Mad Sharp had said, there were plenty of those articles, began to shuffle them with the ease of an expert gambler.

Bobson, shrouded in the large clothing of the old man, lay on his back dreamily watching the operations of his companions until the latter, striking the edges of the cards upon the table with a loud smack seated himself, and looked askance at the recumbent hotel-keeper.

"What shall we play?" asked Bull, as Bobson took a seat on the opposite side of the table.

"Got any money?"

"Some."

"So hev I. Make it poker."

"Whatever you say."

The two men each produced a roll of bills, and went cautiously to work. Neither knew the ability of the other in the game.

Bull Worth dealt first, Bobson watching him like a cat to see that the deal was "on the square." Then Bull, holding his cards carefully in the hollow of his left hand, began to bet. Bobson, with the settled conviction that the offers of his opponent to back his hand was only a bluff, took the bets, raised, and went so many better, until there were over \$800 in the pile in the middle of the table. Then he called.

Bull confidently threw down four aces.

With one glance at the cards on the table, Bobson held up another ace and grasped the pile of bills.

At the same instant his wrist was in the clutch of Bull's bony fingers, while the right hand of each man flew to his revolver.

But neither drew his weapon.

The trap over their head opened a little way, and the muzzle of a rifle was shoved through, while the clear tones of Marie sounded in the words:

"Quit that!"

The men did not move.

"Quit that! Give up them stakes, an' both on yer take yer own money back or I'll fill yer both with holes till yer won't know yerselves from er cinder sifter. You hear me now."

"What d'ye say, Bobson?"

"I'm agreeable."

"All right. Take yer hand from yer belt."

"You take your hand away, too."

Both obeyed the injunction at the same moment, and, with crestfallen faces, divided the money, each taking the amount he had put in.

Then they looked up and saw that the trap had been put down again. Marie had seen that her order had been regarded, and had gone back to bed again. The noise they had made over their game had disturbed her, and she had interposed in her own way, without troubling her father. He may or may not have heard the dispute. If he did hear it he certainly did not take the trouble to inquire into the cause of it, but slept peacefully on his cot with an air of getting through serious business that was characteristic of all he did.

"Bull!"

"Wal?"

"Keards don't seem ter be much uv er success with us, do they?"

"Not very much. Guess you play too well for me, pard," returned Bull Worth, with a grin.

Bobson grinned in response, and the two beauties resembled a pair of Hindoo idols on a surreptitious lark.

"I guess it wuz you ez played too well, Bull," observed Bobson, as he wriggled about in the big suit of clothing that he wore. "Yer see, when you showed up them four aces I wuz ready with three more, so I knowed ther must be something wrong somewhar, and in course ther game couldn't go on thet way."

"No," acquiesced Bull, in a tone of conviction.

"Too many aces sort o' spoils the game uv draw-poker, eh, pard?"

"Yes, 'specially when thar's seven uv 'em flashed up at once," said Bull. "Guess we'd better try an' sleep some, after all."

Replenishing the fire in the stove, and giving a little shiver of comfort, Bull lay down in his old place where he could feel the warmth, and this time went to sleep without delay his ex-

ample being followed a moment later by Bobson.

Bobson had turned down the light in the lamp, and soon there was not a sound to break the stillness save the rather boisterous snoring of Bullard Worth and an occasional resounding snort from the hotel-keeper.

There they slept, hour after hour, while the gloom of early morning, which remained in this deep valley an hour after it had been dispelled in more open country, gradually gave way to the dawn, and another beautiful Colorado day had begun.

The chilliness of the night that had made a fire in the house almost a necessity, gave way to the balmy breath of a soft summer morning, inspiring the birds in the tall pines and cottonwood trees to burst into melody, and making the two horses Fan and Demon—who had been left in a shed at the back of the house sometimes used as a temporary stable—neigh shrilly in salute to the rising sun.

As we have said, there were no windows in the ranch. Hence, there was nothing to warm the inmates that the sun was getting toward the zenith, and that out in the world the day's business had more than begun.

The two men by the dining-room stove had ceased their snoring and snorting, and were now in that deep slumber which is marked only by the faintest and most regular breathing. The fire in the stove had died down to white embers, and the occasional click that they gave, as they shifted under the influence of decay, seemed to gather unusual strength from the surrounding silence.

The trap leading to Marie's room opened slowly and quietly, and the girl, with her rifle slung over her shoulder, came down the ladder.

She looked at the two men sleeping by the stove, with a smile, and stepping over the form of Bobson, who was stretched across the room, made her way to the other room, where the sloping passage led toward the stable.

She went on until she reached the stall in which stood the brown horse by himself, his usual companions, Fan and Demon being outside in the shed, as already stated.

"Ha, old fellow; all by yourself, eh? Too bad. Never mind; I'll bring in the others very soon."

The horse whinnied. He knew Marie as well as Fan, though he was not often favored to the extent of being ridden by her.

"What do you want? Some water? You shall have it. I want some, too, though not ter drink. I feel ez if I hadn't been washed for a year," went on Marie.

She hustled about, with a pail in her hand, and going into a corner with a lantern, which she had taken from a nail, uncovered a natural basin in the rocky wall, through which ran a perpetual stream of icy-cold water.

Bringing the pail full to the horse, he drank with great apparent gusto, the girl stroking his neck and talking caressingly to him the while.

"Now, Marie, old pard, I guess you'd better take er little sluice ef you want to look decent when the dad gits up."

She went to the natural basin in the rock and bathed her face in the cold water until she was in a glow. Then giving a toss to her sunny hair that streamed in ripples down her back, her toilet was made, with the result that she was as pretty an object as could have been found anywhere within a thousand miles of the Rockies on that bright summer morning.

"Now I guess I'll go and wake up dad. It must be nearly noon. Wal, he hev work ter do I guess, an' ther sooner we git 'bout it ther better. I'd like ter know what became uv all them people ez wuz left in ther ranch—the Drummer an' ther rest."

She hung the lantern on its nail on the post, and carelessly looked along the passage leading toward the pit by which egress was afforded to the lake. She started and drew her revolver.

Then she crept softly into the dark, keeping close to the wall.

She had seen a glimmer of white, that might have been a face peering out of the dense gloom.

"This thing is altogether too interesting," she muttered: "I don't propose ter hev ther place used in this hyar permiskus way by them show folks an' detectives, ef I knows myself."

Cautiously she crept along, pistol in hand.

The white object, whatever it was, had disappeared, but she knew that it could not be very far away, and she held herself in readiness for a sudden attack at any moment.

"Ah! Hyar it is again! She was a brave girl, used to defending herself, and she did not hesitate to jump toward the white object, that she was sure now was a face.

But she never reached it.

There was a rushing sound behind her, and before she could turn to face her new enemy a heavy sack had been thrown over her head and pulled down so as to pinion her arms, and she knew that she was in the power of some one, though the identity of her assailant was a mystery.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET BOLT.

WHEN the detective and Red Bill came to examine the secret room into which they had been shoved by Bull Worth they found that they were immured in a place from which there seemed small chance of escape without outside assistance.

"Wal, Cap, what do yer think uv this?" asked Bill, with the manner of a man who had only the slightest interest in the matter in hand. He evidently considered it the detective's particular funeral, in which he (Bill) was not concerned at all.

"It will be all right, Bill," answered Peachblossom, calmly, as he slowly put on his clothes which had dried nicely by the furnace—and touched himself up here and there with the deftness characteristic of one careful of his personal appearance.

"Will it, Cap? Well, thet's good."

Bill was quite satisfied with the detective's assurance, and had no more doubt that they would get out of their predicament than he had of his own identity.

Peachblossom did not speak in a confident manner without a solid basis for his expression, and Red Bill knew it by experience.

"Air we goin' ter force ther door, Cap?" asked Red Bill, after a pause.

"No, Bill, I guess not. Look at that door and tell me what chance there is of forcing it."

Red Bill tapped the thick iron door—almost as strongly built as that of a fire and burglar proof safe—and shook his head.

"Makes your knuckles sore even to knock upon it, doesn't it, Bill?"

"Somewhat."

"Exactly. No, Bill, we shall not force the door. But—we shall get out through the doorway in course of time, sure as you are alive."

"I don't doubt it, Cap."

Peachblossom was dressed by this time, and although his coat showed the effects of the water that had been dashed over it, on close inspection the way in which its wearer had put it on and buttoned it made it look much better than would have been possible in other hands.

"Bill, get some of those sacks from the corner and make up a couple of beds for us in front of the furnace. We must get a little sleep for an hour or two."

Bill did as he was told, and then, at the detective's suggestion, or rather command, lay down and went to sleep, with Peachblossom by his side.

For two hours they slept without interruption, every minute sending back the strength to their limbs and the energy to their hearts and brains, as nothing but sleep could.

While they lie there, let us take a look about their prison-chamber and see what it really is.

Already the reader knows that the paraphernalia for casting counterfeit money were the most prominent features of the place, and that the detective had recognized them at once. There had long been a stream of bogus gold and silver coin passing into Chicago from somewhere in the West, but it had never been traced further than Pueblo. There the trail had been lost, although the money continued to be set afloat and to be kept in circulation without hindrance.

The room itself, in which the detective and Red Bill were now so contentedly sleeping, was rock all around, above and below. The door was of iron, and was the only portion of the chamber that had the appearance of artificiality.

The floor was covered with the debris from the furnace and the money-manufacturing operations that had evidently been going on for years. Here and there, where the dust and rubbish had been kicked on one side, the rock showed, but generally the thick carpet of ashes, metal dust and mud covered everything.

The only opening was in the ceiling, where a small hole, not more than four inches in diameter, had been hewn to let the pipe of the furnace fit in. Where the smoke went to did not appear, but a following up of the hole would have revealed that it opened into the pit on the island, where, since the furnace was never used except at night, a thin stream of smoke could arise without the least danger of its being seen by inquisitive strangers.

Mad Sharp was one of the boldest counterfeiters in the country, and until the Drummer Detective and Red Bill happened to stumble upon the workshop, its existence was known to but three persons—Mad Sharp, Bullard Worth and Zedekiah Bobson.

Marie had never been admitted to the secret chamber, and she had no more idea that her father was engaged in such a business than had the general public of Bobson's Corners.

The Drummer Detective and Red Bill were still sleeping on contentedly when whispering voices on the other side of the iron door brought the former to his feet, wide awake on the instant.

"What was that?" he muttered.

The voices, low as they were, had proved sufficient to disturb him, but only with a hazy idea of what he had heard.

He listened intently. Then drawing close to

the door he put his ear close to it—by the merest chance opposite the small hole through which Bull Worth enjoyed a view of his prisoners before going to the ranch.

"I heard some one, and it sounded to me like—"

He stopped his soliloquy, for he could now hear distinctly the words:

"Tony, you're a fool."

"Yes, my dear."

"In the first place, I don't see what made you come on such a wild-goose chase. It was no business of yours."

The detective smiled. Mr. and Mrs. Black were indulging in their usual connubialities, as they would, he verily believed, if they were each tied to a cannon's mouth, expecting to be blown to atoms every instant.

"But, my dear," he heard Tony say, in a tone of mild expostulation, "you wouldn't have liked me to go back on Joe Grattan, would you?"

"No, of course not. But you haven't helped him very much as far as I can see. That long-legged, sick-looking scamp, with the big yellow teeth, has played some mean trick on him, and may have killed him, for anything you know, and you don't seem to know what to do next."

"I don't," was Tony's candid confession.

The detective's smile was now very broad. He was enjoying the dialogue unspeakably.

"Well, what are we going to do now?" went on Mrs. Black, in an indignant tone. "That brute is up-stairs, but he might come down at any minute. Then there will be more of it. You know we heard him say to himself that he had got Joe where he wanted him, and how he could put him out of the world without any one being the wiser."

"Yes."

"Yes," repeated Amelia, contemptuously. "It is all very well to say yes. But we want to find him right quick, and then get out of this. I am sick of staying in this place. Besides, the show—"

"Yes, yes. The show! They will turn things upside down while I'm away, and I had just got my Shadowgraphics to work so well too," moaned Tony. "It makes me shiver to think of it. Where can that Joe be?"

"Here," whispered a hollow voice, in his ears.

"Ow! Ow!" howled Tony, as his knees almost gave way under him.

There was the sound of a healthy slap, and Peachblossom knew that Mrs. Black's hand had visited the cheek of her liege lord with the full strength of her good right arm.

"You idiot!"

Poor Tony! To be frightened nearly out of his wits, then to be soundly slapped, and finally to be called an idiot!

Amelia Black did not sympathize with him in the least, however. She considered him an idiot, and had told him so in good Anglo-Saxon.

"Halloa!"

The hollow voice came in a sort of windy whisper close to her head. She did not cry "Ow!" like Tony, or evince any fear. She simply turned her mouth in the direction from which the whisper had come, and answered:

"Halloa!"

"Come close to the door."

"What door? I do not see any door."

The detective understood at once that the door was so arranged as to be unnoticeable, doubtless appearing to be part of the wall. So he directed:

"Come close to the wall!"

Amelia obeyed, while Tony, who held in his hand the lighted candle that they had ventured to use when assured that Bull Worth was upstairs, looked bewildered, and rubbed his cheek where it had been slapped.

"Can you see a little hole anywhere in the wall?" asked the detective.

Amelia took the candle from her husband, and examined the wall with the utmost care.

"No," she answered.

"There is one."

"I cannot see it."

"Wait."

A few minutes' pause, and then a strip of solder poked itself from a crevice that looked like a natural crack in the rock, and in which the closest inspection had not enabled Amelia to find a hole through.

She took hold of the strip of metal and pulled it, as a sign that she had found the opening. It was dragged back, and the voice from the inside spoke again:

"Put your ear close to the opening."

"All right."

"You know who is talking, I suppose."

"Yes, it is Joe Grattan, the Drummer Detective."

"Right. I and Red Bill are in a little room here, with no way of getting out from the inside."

"Well?"

"There must be some fastening out there. The door opens outward, and I suppose there must be some bolts and perhaps a lock. This hole is an equal distance from each side of the door, and perhaps a foot from the top. Wait while I measure."

There was a pause for a few minutes, and then the voice of the detective said:

"Measure from your elbow to the tips of your fingers from the hole, and it will bring you to the edge at the top on both sides."

"My! he's smart, ain't he?" whispered Tony. "What a showman he would make! I would like to have him for a lecturer to tell the people about the freaks. I bet he could talk for an hour on a fat lady, a Circassian beauty, or a tattooed man!"

"Shut up, and don't be a fool, if you can help it! You are always thinking about that show of yours."

This was very unkind on the part of Mrs. Black, for a few minutes before she had been reminding her husband of the show. But although she was kind to him in a general way, she was often unjust to him in details.

"Halloa!" came from the other side of the wall.

"Halloa!" she replied.

"Have you measured the wall?"

"Not yet. This idiotic husband of mine has been holding me back. But I'll do it now."

She followed the detective's directions implicitly, and soon was able to whisper to him that she had found the boundaries of the concealed door.

"Good!" he replied. "Now, listen!"

"Go on."

"Feel carefully down the crack on your right for something that may be a fastening. Commence at the top, and go all the way down."

"He's a cute one!" observed Tony in another uncontrollable burst of admiration.

"Shut up!"

Amelia was so in the habit of snubbing poor Tony, that she often did it unconsciously.

"What do you say?" came from the detective through the door.

"Nothing. I'm looking for the fastening."

She put her fingers to the very top of the crack, and ran them down to the bottom. No result. There was certainly no bolt or lock.

"Well?" whispered Peachblossom.

"I've done it, but I cannot find anything."

"Try it two or three inches away from the crack, all the way down."

Tony was evidently about to give utterance to another expression of admiration of the detective's smartness, but a look from his wife, her black eyes flashing ominously in the light of the candle, made him choke back his remark and drop his eyes abashed.

Then Amelia, beginning at the top of the door, three inches from the crack, allowed her fingers to travel slowly down until she reached the middle of the door.

She paused, Tony's eyes bulging like wads of chewing-gum on a window-pane in an agony of eagerness.

"What have you found?" he ventured to ask.

But he got no reply save a peremptory command to shut up, which he obeyed without protest.

Amelia was carefully feeling about a certain spot on the door where something had arrested her attention and her hand at the same time.

She picked away at something soft with her finger-nails, and soon removed a quantity of bread—from around a certain spot on the door. When she had picked away enough bread to feed a large colony of birds, there was revealed on the door, by the light of the candle which Tony held close to it, a knob.

This knob her fingers had come in contact with as they ran down the door, but the bread had been carefully packed around it, and covered with dirt so as to hide the knob from any ordinary observer.

"Halloa!" she whispered, through the hole.

"Halloa!"

"I have found a knob. I suppose it is a fastening of some kind."

While speaking she was trying to turn the knob, but it was immovable. Then she put all her strength and tried to push it back. In this she was more successful, for, with a sullen creak, it obeyed her, and slowly gave way.

The next moment the door of the room flew open, nearly knocking down poor Tony Black, and the Drummer Detective stepped out and clasped the hand of Amelia with grateful warmth.

CHAPTER XXIII.

MARIE CALLS HER FATHER.

ALL through the proceedings narrated in the latter part of the last chapter Red Bill slept undisturbedly in front of the smelting furnace.

He had none to rest with the assurance of the detective in his mind that they would get safely through the doorway in due course, and he felt that he need not trouble himself any further until he was called upon to do something for his chief.

Peachblossom had not thought it worth while to awaken him until the discussion with Amelia Black was in progress. There was nothing to be done that Bill could have assisted in, and, moreover, the detective thought it would be a good joke not to call him up till he could show him the open door.

But the creaking of the bolts and the sudden draught of cold air that rushed into the room when the door swung open, took the edge off

Bill's slumbers as it were, and he was wide awake when the detective called him by name, just as the door opened.

He was on his feet at once, revolver in hand, as he realized that something had taken place while he slept, but he was not at all surprised at the door being open. Had not Peachblossom said that they would be able to go through the doorway? Red Bill knew that the detective always kept his word, and there would have been more cause for wonder, in Bill's mind, if the door had not been open by this time.

"Come in, Tony, and we will shut the door—almost," said the detective, as he took a piece of wood, such as was used for fuel in the furnace, and put it between the edge of the door and the door-post.

It was well that he took this precaution, for the bolt worked with a spring, and had the door been allowed to close, the whole four would have been prisoners, with no one outside to help them to liberty.

"Now, Tony, tell us how things are in the house?" commenced Peachblossom, as he poked up the fire in the furnace to dispel the cold, damp air that had crept in from the long passage.

"Bad," answered Tony, sententiously.

"Bad? How?"

"Well, Bullard Worth is up there and that is enough to make things bad, without anything else, in my opinion."

"Haw! Haw!" laughed Bill.

"Bill!" said the detective sternly.

"Yes, Cap," responded Red Bill, now supernaturally grave.

"Don't laugh."

"I won't."

"Now, Tony, where did you and Amelia come from?" went on the detective.

"We came from this stable just now," interrupted Amelia. "You see, I couldn't rest easily in that up-stairs room while I knew that you were somewhere about the house. I wanted to get out of this, and when I didn't hear you below I made up my mind that there was something that needed looking into. We had been asleep for quite a while, when thinking about things woke me up, and I made Tony help me get into the other room and down by the other ladder. Then we sneaked down here without being seen by any one, and here we are."

"Good! Well, now, I do not want to go away from here just now."

Amelia's eyes opened wide in astonishment, and Terry said:

"Gosh!"

They could not understand any one wanting to remain a prisoner in this underground dungeon.

"I do not intend to remain a prisoner," explained Peachblossom. "But I cannot lose sight of this place now that I have found it. You three remain here. You are all well armed, and, if it is necessary, shoot. But do not blaze away as long as there is any possibility of avoiding it. You hear what I say?"

"Yes, Cap."

Red Bill answered for his companions and himself, and Peachblossom, settling himself into his coat, and touching himself up here and there, as if he were going for a fashionable promenade, drew his revolver and left the secret room.

His three friends looked after him with different expressions of countenance. Tony was simply mystified; Amelia's surprise was mingled with a little indignation at being shut out of the detective's confidence. As for Red Bill, there was neither astonishment nor indignation to be detected in his face. He was as calm as if he had been left under the most ordinary circumstances. He never questioned the Drummer Detective's actions.

Peachblossom put his head through the doorway a moment after he had passed through it.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Cap."

"I will not be long. If I signal, you come."

"Yes, Cap."

"And mind that door does not get fastened."

"Yes, Cap."

Peachblossom walked rapidly along the passage. He prided himself upon being able to find his way over any road that he had traveled once.

The stables! With a lantern still lighted.

"No one here," muttered the detective. "I must find out what is going on up-stairs, because when once I begin my search for the will, I must not be disturbed."

He walked cautiously a few steps further and then darted back into the shadow.

He had seen somebody or something evidently, and it was equally evident that he did not wish to be seen himself.

He hid behind an inequality in the stone-wall of the dark passage and awaited developments.

They soon came. Marie, with her rifle over her shoulder, came forward from the basin where she had been sluicing her face, and looking straight at the spot upon which Peachblossom stood, came forward, revolver in hand.

"She means to shoot. I can see that," said the detective to himself.

He did not care about receiving a bullet in his

mouth, and he was equally reluctant to hurt the girl. Therefore he obeyed the dictates of prudence, and, favored by the rough wall, skipped from point to point further into the darkness.

We know already how Marie boldly pursued the white face into the darkness, and how it always eluded her, like a flesh-and-blood will-o'-the-wisp.

Peachblossom had nothing against her except for her being the daughter of Mad Sharp. That fact, he knew, was enough to make her regard him as an enemy, and he had seen enough of the young lady to believe that she would shoot him down like a dog if she thought that he was seeking to injure her father.

Peachblossom backed further and further into the passage until he was opposite the nearly-closed door of the secret chamber in which he had lately been Bullard Worth's prisoner.

The girl was close upon him, and he did not know at what moment she might send a bullet crashing through his brain. It was not a pleasant anticipation, even for a brave man, and the detective did not hesitate as to his course.

He made a peculiar sound with his tongue against his front teeth that, hardly noticeable by the ordinary ear, was a well-understood signal between Red Bill and himself, intimating that assistance was needed instantly.

Red Bill dashed out of the doorway, the opening of the door suffering a gleam of light to play upon the detective's face.

Marie sprung forward! Bill saw her, and by a sudden inspiration understood just what to do. Hastily picking up one of the coarse sacks that had served for beds for Peachblossom and himself, he threw it dexterously over the head of the girl, and made her a prisoner in the way described in Chapter xxi.

Peachblossom nodded, and Red Bill dragged the struggling girl into the room.

"Take away her weapons," whispered the detective to Amelia, "and do it gently."

He added this last admonition because he detected an unmistakable intention on the part of the dark-eyed Mrs. Black to behave rather roughly.

As it was, Amelia, like every one else who came into contact with the Drummer Detective, did not care to oppose him, and she lifted Marie's knife from her belt and twitched her revolver away with a sudden jerk that, while it made the girl's blood fairly boil, could not be called a cruel movement.

"See that she is entirely disarmed," directed Peachblossom, when Amelia had banded over the revolver, knife, and Winchester that until now had been slung by its strap over Marie's shoulder.

"She hasn't anything else," announced Amelia, after a moment's further search.

"Good! Now take off the sack."

Marie looked around with eyes that flashed as imperiously as ever did the darker orbs of the showman's wife. She broke away from Red Bill, who had been holding her arm, and grasped the detective by the throat.

"Oh, the she-cat!" exclaimed Amelia.

She caught Marie by the hair that streamed in golden waves down her back and tried to pull her away, but without avail. Marie had Peachblossom in a clutch of grim death.

The detective bore it good-humoredly for a few seconds. Then, as he realized that the girl would really choke him to death if he did not prevent it, he gently but irresistibly took her hand from his throat, and leading her to a stool near the furnace, forced her to sit down.

"Put your hands up!" he commanded, briefly.

"I won't do anything of the kind," declared Marie, as she gritted her pretty white teeth and laid her two hands together in her lap.

Like a flash a pair of bright steel handcuffs encircled her wrists, and she saw that the detective had fooled her.

"Very wal, Mr.—Mr. Drummer! Jist wait till my father finds out how you served his daughter. Mad Sharp is a man ez kills, every time he tries ter do it. I wouldn't give er dollar fer yer chance uv bein' alive this hyar time tomorrow."

The girl hissed these words through her set teeth, and if looks could slay she would have stretched Peachblossom dead at her feet.

He was not taking any notice of her now, however. He was talking in low tones to Tony Black and his wife in a corner, and they were nodding obediently in response to certain orders he was giving them.

Red Bill, with his back against the door, waited patiently for the detective to finish his confab with Tony and Amelia, at the same time keeping a watchful eye upon Marie.

"For," he argued to himself, "ef ther gal gits away ag'in ther captain will blame me, an' I'd sooner take er lickin' than hev him look at me ther way he kin look, when he gits mad!"

"Now, Marie, you will have to come with us for an hour or two. We will not do you any harm, but you must come. The captain says so."

The girl's eyes flashed fire.

"What hev I ter do with ther captain, ez you call him? I will stay hyar till I feel like movin', an' you kin make up yer mind ter thet right now."

She planted her feet firmly on the ground with her eyes fixed on the handcuffs that held her wrists, set her teeth, and looked the picture of beautiful obstinacy.

"Come on," was all that Amelia Black said, as she put her hand on Marie's shoulder.

"I tell you I won't."

Peachblossom walked quietly over to her and whispered something in her ear. She started as if she had been stung by a hornet.

"I don't believe it. He is up-stairs."

"He is not. He is outside in the clump of trees on the other side of the lake, waiting for you. When you get out you can give him the signal, and you will see," replied Peachblossom calmly.

"Let me go, I believe you air lying ter me. But I'll go an' see. Take these hyar nasty things off my hands. Thar ain't no use in them."

"Yes, there is—until you have obeyed me."

She looked at him for a few seconds, but his determined face told her that he meant to hold her under his thumb until he thought fit to release her.

"Very well, Mr. Drummer. My dad will 'tend ter your case. He's acted squar' by you so far, an' treated you like er man, an' this is ther way you serve his daughter."

There were tears in the girl's eyes as she said this, and the detective felt a pang of something like remorse. But he reminded himself that he was acting for the best interests of the girl, although he did not like the deceit he was obliged to practice on her.

"I shall not hurt his daughter," he said quietly. "And as for what he may do to me, that is my affair, and I am taking all risks upon my own shoulders."

"Are you ready?" suddenly demanded the girl of Tony and Amelia, ignoring the detective's last remark.

"Quite," answered Tony.

"Wal, then, take me whar you like."

Amelia, with her rifle in her right hand seized the girl by the elbow, not roughly but so firmly that it would have been useless for the latter to try and get away, and with Tony on the other side led her out of the passage, into the pit and up the inclined platform that was easily placed in position to the little landing whence, as we know, it was possible to row across the water to either the island on which stood the ranch or to the main land.

"No boat here," observed Tony.

"Of course not, said his wife." "Marie, you must give the signal to your father."

Pressing up her pretty lips Marie emitted a long peculiar whine like that of a troubled hound, and after repeating it several times, had the satisfaction of hearing it answered in the same manner from the house.

A moment later Mad Sharp, with Bobson at his heels, the latter still in his baggy clothing, and both fully armed, appeared at the water's edge, and embarked in the large, flat-bottom row-boat with considerable haste.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN ARREST FOR MURDER.

AS soon as the two Blacks had disappeared, the detective looked swiftly around the room with a thoughtful countenance, Red Bill stroking his fiery whiskers, and waiting for the next move.

"Fasten that door, Bill."

"Yes, Cap."

"Now, Bill, the will and the gold-dust that we have come so far to find is in this very room."

Red Bill would have expressed surprise, perhaps, if he had not been used to the promptitude of his companion in finding out things. As it was he said nothing, but waited for something else.

"It will take us some hours to get at it, Bill," went on Peachblossom, "and we do not wish to be disturbed. We must keep the old man away for awhile."

"Yes."

"What is why I got Marie out of the room, and let her signal her father. He will go to her, of course, and we must keep him out of the house until we have found what we are looking for."

"But he will kill Tony Black, won't he?"

"No, I will attend to that. Follow me."

The detective had picked up his rifle, and seeing that Red Bill was similarly armed, ran quickly through the passage and stables, and up the sloping passage toward the dining-room, so quietly that his footsteps were absolutely inaudible.

The door leading to the dining-room was partly open.

The detective had intended to go right in, for supposing that Mad Sharp had gone out in response to the signal of his daughter [he knew that the old man would not neglect such a signal for a moment], he reckoned on the house being empty.

Peachblossom's habits of caution prevented his doing anything rashly however. He stopped on the outside of the door and peered in.

Then he drew himself behind the door, and took a long look into the dining-room, while a sneer curled his lip, and an amused light danced in his eyes.

Bull Worth had just taken out his precious chart, and was studying it intently on the table.

"What is he looking at, I wonder?" mused the detective, as he held up his hand warningly to Red Bill, as a sign that he was not to make the least noise.

Bull Worth, now that Mad Sharp and Bobson had gone out—although he did not know why, for he did not pay any attention to the signal of the girl, which he took to be the actual whining of a dog—was trying to make use of every minute at his disposal in their absence. He knew that if he intended to get the treasure which the chart and note-book would put in his hands, he must act quickly, and take advantage of every moment that he could get to himself while in the house.

Once out of it, he would, perhaps, never get another chance to get in, for Mad Sharp had shown him now that he thoroughly distrusted him, and if he, Bull Worth, was allowed to get away with his life after what had taken place, he could not hope for anything more.

Bull bent lower over his chart, and with his finger carefully held on a particular spot, looked down on a page of his open note-book for further instructions.

The detective—holding his breath, and with his rifle so poised that in case of his looking up, Bull would see the muzzle directed toward him—stole softly into the dining-room.

Bull Worth, bending over his chart, had not the faintest suspicion that he was not alone. He had put Peachblossom and Red Bill safely away in the secret-chamber below, as he believed, and there was no one else in the house.

The detective had passed along the wall until now he was immediately behind the desperado.

Red Bill had remained outside, in accordance with Peachblossom's whispered directions, but with his rifle covering Bull Worth. He was not to fire, however, unless directly ordered by the detective to do so. A rifle-shot would be likely to bring Mad Sharp to the house, an event that would be inconvenient at this stage of affairs.

Bull Worth's finger was slowly traveling down the chart, in obedience to certain sentences in the note-book.

"Yes," he muttered. "Hyar it is. In ther little room on ther left uv ther passage. Then, remove ther furnace, an' measure thirty-five inches from ther wall to—"

His voice resolved itself into unspoken thoughts as he intently marked out the directions on the chart.

Peachblossom had gradually drawn nearer to him, until now there were two pair of eyes, instead of one, fixed on the chart.

For a wonder, those of the detective expressed the utmost astonishment. It was so seldom that he allowed himself to show surprise, that the circumstance is worthy of particular note.

But the sight of this chart and note-book, that he recognized at once by certain marks that had caught his keen eye when looking at it in Matthew Thorne's dingy office in Chicago, almost caused him to cry out.

How could it have come into the possession of Bull Worth. This was a problem that taxed his guessing powers to the utmost.

Bull, all unconscious of the surprise he had excited in the detective's bosom, was still pursuing his researches. Though the directions appeared to be unmistakable, he was going over and over the lines and dots on the chart, to make assurance doubly sure.

"I hev ther thing in my own hands, ef I kin only manage ter git at it. Now, what am I ter do with ther smarty from Chicago," he muttered, vindictively. "Ef I open ther door he's li'ble ter let me hev it from his gun afore I kin do er thing. I might catch him on ther hop an' let him hev er bullet fu'st perhaps, but it's durned risky. I never seeer man ez quick on ther shoot ez he is."

He twisted his ungainly limbs in his perplexity, bending lower over the chart as he did so.

Peachblossom who had been listening to Bull's soliloquy with a derisive smile, held up his hand to Red Bill, for the latter had heard Bull say something, he could not tell exactly what, and he at once interpreted it as a menace to "the captain."

"Thet durned old man will be in ag'in soon, too, I suppose," went on Bull Worth, following the troubled train of his thoughts. "Wonder ef it would be safe ter give him away? No, no, thet wouldn't do. Even ef he wuz shut up in jail he'd find some way uv gittin' at me. 'Sides, he'd tell 'em that I'd put out most uv ther stuff he'd made, an' I'd go ther same way ez him even ef he didn't manage ter git ther drop on me with his gun some way or 'nother. They make it purty hot fer shovers uv ther queer out in this hyar section. No, no; that wouldn't do."

He gave another twist to his long legs, for he was standing up as he leaned over the table, and tried to comfort himself by searching again over the chart for some answer to the questions he was asking himself so vainly.

"It's no use!" he said at last. "I must wait

fer somethin' ter turn up. I'll try an' find out what old man Sharpe is er doin'. Then I'll know what will be the best move for me."

He carefully folded up the chart, and holding it loosely on his open palm, looked at it lovingly.

Suddenly a hand darted forward from behind him, snatched the chart and note-book, and striking him with tremendous force on the back of the neck, caused him to fall forward upon the table.

Before he could get his hands to his pistol or collect his thoughts, the muzzle of Red Bill's rifle was within a yard of his breast, and he was ordered by that gentleman, in the gruffest tones to "Throw up them thar hands!"

"I won't" he yelled, in a perfect frenzy, as he rushed at the Drummer Detective.

Peachblossom was holding the chart and note-book in his left hand, and with his rifle in his right was ready for just such an attack.

"Keep off, Bullard," he said, with his exasperating smile. "You cannot do anything."

As he spoke he pushed the desperado back with the muzzle of his weapon as he might have driven a refractory hog.

"Give me my—my—property," yelled Bull Worth, as he put his hand in the direction of his belt.

"Hyar! Quit that!" interposed Red Bill, sternly. He saw that Worth was in such a rage that he did not properly comprehend the order to throw up his hands, so he did not insist upon the desperado's observance of that piece of Western etiquette.

"Your property?"

There was a ring of intense sarcasm in the detective's stern tones.

Bull Worth stopped. He thought of the way in which the chart and note-book had come into his possession, and then the vision of old Matthew Thorne's sightless eyes and ghastly face seemed to be before him.

"Cuss thet old man! I allers see him jist when I don't want ter," he muttered. "Now he's hyar ag'in. I wish I hedn't hit him so hard thet time!"

"What d'ye say, Bull?" asked Peachblossom, who seemed to the frightened wretch, to know everything that could possibly redound to his (Bull's) disadvantage.

But before Bull could reply—if, indeed, he intended to do so—there was a scuffling in the room overhead, the trap opening of which yawned immediately above the detective, and two men came down the ladder with a celerity that was explained by their having both missed their footing at the top, and being compelled to slide down the whole length of the ladder.

Peachblossom had already put the chart and note-book in his pocket. He burst into a merry laugh at the unexpected advent of the two strangers.

As for Bull Worth and Red Bill, they started back in opposite directions and could only stand, open-mouthed, wondering at it all.

The scene was a ludicrous one.

The first man to descend the ladder was a short, puffy individual, with a jolly red nose and iron-gray hair. He wore a plug hat and an ordinary business suit. The plug hat had doubtless been a very handsome and imposing article of wearing apparel in its day. Just now it was crushed over its wearer's ears and was in a terrible state of dilapidation.

The other stranger was a thin man, the very opposite of his companion in appearance. His face, pale and flabby, was that of a life-long dyspeptic, who had never known a happy moment since he was born.

In coming down the ladder after his stout friend, he had accidentally jammed both feet upon the latter's hat, with the result described above.

Both the strangers rolled on the floor in a confused heap, the Winchester rifles with which each was armed falling from their hands and leaving their owners defenseless had any hostile move been made by the original occupants of the dining-room.

The big lamp on the table, by the light of which Bull Worth had so lately been gloating over the chart and note-book that had cost old Matthew Thorne his life, rocked dangerously as the intruders banged against the table, but, fortunately, was not overturned.

Peachblossom was the first to speak.

"Well, this is a nice way to introduce yourself, Bob. What are you here for?"

"No levity, if you please," returned the fat man, with portentous solemnity, as, having picked up his rifle, he regained his feet and looked around with magisterial severity.

"No levity," repeated the thin man.

Peachblossom looked from one to the other in a mystified manner. He recognized both men as members of the regular police of Chicago, having been occasionally brought into contact with them. But as he was a member of the Secret Service—a branch rather higher than that to which they were attached, he was generally regarded by the regulars with the envious dislike peculiar to men who do not like to see others over their heads.

"What are you doing here?" demanded the detective. "Have you any warrant for coming

into this house? You know that it belongs to one Madison Sharpe, do you not?"

"We know all about it," declared the fat man, in a superior way.

"We know all about it," piped the thin man. Both here threw back their coats and showed that their vests were decorated with silver badges signifying that they were members of the Chicago Police Department.

"Exactly," said Peachblossom, replying in words to this tacit declaration of their official standing. "But what is your business here? Have you a warrant for entering this house?"

"We have all the warrant we want. Had you a warrant for coming in here?" asked the fat man.

"Had you a warrant for coming in here?" repeated the thin man.

Peachblossom felt as if he would have liked very much to kick the thin man. The parrot-like repetition of every word spoken by the fat man was maddening to the detective.

"I am here at the invitation of the owner," answered the detective, coming measurably near the truth. "I am a police officer from Chicago, as you both know well. If you will tell me what you are after here, perhaps I can help you."

"Is your name Joseph Grattan?" asked the fat man, taking no heed of the detective's remarks.

"Yes. You know it is."

"Very well then, Joseph Grattan," continued the fat man, taking a paper from his pocket, opening it, and holding it out in his left hand, while he placed his right on Peachblossom's shoulder. "I arrest you, Joseph Grattan, for murder!"

CHAPTER XXV.

CHEATED OF THEIR PREY.

FOR a moment Peachblossom stood as if petrified, with the fat man's hand still on his shoulder.

"For murder?" he faltered, when at last he managed to speak.

"For murder; that's what I said!" answered the fat man, stolidly.

"For murder," repeated the thin man.

"But—what? I do not understand! Where is your warrant?"

The fat man held out the paper, but would not allow the detective to take it from his hand. A hasty glance over it was sufficient to assure Peachblossom that it was a warrant regularly drawn up and signed by a Chicago judge, directing that "the body of one Joseph Grattan" be brought safely to Chicago, that the said Joseph Grattan might answer to the charge of murder, etc.

"Yes, that is straight enough," he murmured.

"Of course it's straight enough!" said the fat man.

"Of course it's straight enough!" echoed his follower.

Bull Worth was watching the proceedings with a gloating smile, and trying to assume an air of bravado.

"Who am I charged with murdering, Bob?" asked the detective.

"I don't know why I should tell you. It ain't none of my business. All I have to do is to arrest you and take you to Chicago at once, unless you insist upon my getting extradition papers."

"Oh, no. I will go without them. There is some mistake, of course. But I will go to Chicago with you."

"Always is some mistake when a fellow gets dragged in on a serious charge," observed Bob.

"Ha, ha!" ejaculated the thin man, with a solemn countenance. It was his way of showing that he was amused.

Peachblossom raised his hand as if he would give the thin man a hearty thump, and the latter presented his revolver at the detective's head instantly.

"Put that gun away, Nat. He won't do any harm. I know Joe Grattan too well. He is an officer himself, and he knows that we must do our duty," said the fat man, who did not want to have any trouble with the detective if it could be avoided.

"Will you tell me whom I have murdered?" asked the detective, disregarding the fat man's last remark.

"You are charged with the murder of—"

The fat man hesitated, as if he thought he was too complaisant.

"Yes?" said the detective, eagerly.

"With the murder of—Matthew Thorne!"

Peachblossom started back, with an expression of horrified astonishment.

"What? Matthew Thorne? Dead?"

"Ha, ha!" laughed the thin man, again.

"Didn't know he was dead, eh?" said Bob, sarcastically.

"No."

"Um!"

"Um!" repeated Nat.

"Come on, Mr. Grattan."

Thus speaking, the fat man produced a pair of handcuffs and held them out.

The detective drew back in indignant amaze.

"What—?" he commenced.

"It's a serious charge, you know, Mr. Grattan," remarked Bob, half apologetically.

"But you need not handcuff me," put in the detective, hastily. "You know that I shall not run away. Though, I confess it is very awkward to be dragged away at this time, when I have so much important business to attend to."

"Doubtless."

"Do you know why I am charged with this murder, since I suppose it is true that poor old Matthew Thorne has been killed by some one?"

"Well, I'll tell you, though it is no part of my duty to do it," answered Bob. "You see, they found the old man lying across his table in his little office, stabbed to the heart, with a bowie-knife in the wound, while over his face there was a white handkerchief with the initials 'J. G.' in the corner of it."

As Bob told this story in a deliberate way, indicating that he knew it by heart, and was quite sure of his facts, Bull Worth's sallow face contorted with the eagerness that overspread it, and his yellow teeth chattered in spite of himself.

"You must come right along, now, Joe. We knew you were here. We have been to this place before, when we had a warrant for old Madison Sharpe for rustling cattle on the other side of Pueblo."

"Did yer sarve ther warrant?" broke in Bull Worth.

The fat man looked at Bull sharply, as if wondering at his audacity in asking such a question. Then he replied, slowly:

"We did not. We reported at the office that he could not be found."

"Well, what did you intend to do with me now?" asked the Drummer Detective. "Are we going back to Chicago at once?"

"No," was Bob's reply. "We have other business here. We shall take you over to Bobson's Corners, and lock you up in the cellar of the hotel until we are ready to start, which may be to-morrow, and may be the next day."

Red Bill had all along been listening and watching the proceedings with his mouth open. He did not wish to interfere without a signal from "the captain," and this signal the Drummer Detective had not given him. Now, however, that the fat, fussy officer talked about shutting Peachblossom in a cellar of the hotel, he could not restrain himself any longer.

"You durned monkey!" he yelled, as with a dexterous movement of his foot he upset the fat officer and then dropped the thin one upon him.

"Quit that, Bill!" commanded the detective, sternly, as with one pull he stood the thin man upon his feet again, and then helped up Bob.

"Very well, sir, we will make it hot for you for interfering with an officer in the execution of his duty," spluttered the fat man, in a towering passion. "Mr. Grattan, go up that ladder. We will take you out the way we came in."

The detective, with a meaning glance at Red Bill that that gentleman thoroughly understood, ran swiftly up the ladder and disappeared.

"Stop him! He is trying to get away!" yelled Bob, giving the thin man an admonitory push. The latter slipped up the ladder with more agility than a stranger to him would have thought possible, and the fat man followed him leisurely, as befitted his size and dignity.

Red Bill, with his rifle in his hand, waited till the fat man had crawled through the trap. Then he hastened after him.

The detective had gained the opening in the roof in the little room, and was sitting on the parapet when the two officers joined him.

The ladder running from the roof to the ground was in position.

"You had better go first," suggested Peachblossom to the fat officer.

Strangely enough, Bob agreed to this arrangement, and went down the ladder carefully and slowly.

He had reached the bottom, and the thin man was half-way down, when Red Bill, who had joined Peachblossom on the roof, gave the ladder a sudden twist, throwing the thin man to the ground. Then he pulled the ladder up and laid it along the gutter.

"Say, you sir, I have a warrant for—"

The fat man was in a fever of indignation, and would doubtless have made a long speech had not Red Bill, with an exclamation of impatience, taken his quid of tobacco from his mouth and thrown it squarely into Bob's eye.

"Now, Cap," he exclaimed, as he pushed the detective down the trap into the little room and hastily secured it with the bar and lock, in which the key was sticking.

The detective removed the key and put it in his pocket. Then he examined the opening in the roof in the other room, and made quite sure this time that no one could get in from the outside without assistance from within.

Peachblossom did not like to thus fool the officers, but he reflected that he was not guilty of the crime with which he was charged, and that he had the moral, if not the legal, right, to escape, if possible, and finish the business that brought him to Mad Sharp's ranch before going back to Chicago. Moreover, he was thinking about something in connection with the murder of Matthew Thorne.

"Where did Bull Worth get that chart?" he muttered to himself.

Here was the key to his suspicions, and he determined to set those suspicions at rest before giving himself up to the two Chicago officers again.

The dining-room reached, he looked around it at once for Bullard Worth. He had disappeared.

"There is no time to lose now, Bill," said the detective. "Let us get back to that little room below and set about the search for the tin box. Poor old Matthew Thorne is dead, it seems, but the secret with which he intrusted me shall be unraveled."

They had reached the stable when a tremendous kicking and scuffling made them hesitate.

"What does that mean, Cap?"

"I don't know, Bill. I suppose that brown horse is tired of standing."

"Making a tremendous noise, all ther same."

The lantern hung on the post and cast a sickly gleam into the stall in which the brown horse passed his time when not outside on duty.

As the detective and his companion drew near they could just make out the animal standing on his hind feet pawing the air, as he uttered neigh after neigh of rage.

"What in thunder is he er doing?" ejaculated Bill, as he drew nearer to the infuriated animal.

A lashing of the hoofs of the horse within a foot or two of Red Bill's head made that gentleman jump back with unusual agility.

The detective laughed loudly.

"What is the trouble, Bill? Brownie seems to have a grudge against you!" he observed, as he occupied himself in his favorite pastime of brushing off the sleeve of his coat with his hand.

It must be confessed that Peachblossom's clothes were anything but neat now. He had saved them as much as possible, but the adventures through which he had passed since his arrival at Bobson's Corners were not conducive to the beauty of a Prince Albert black coat, however careful of it its wearer might be, and however often he might brush it off.

"I don't know what's ther trouble, Cap. Whoa, thar! Whoa, thar!"

The brown horse was pawing in its stall, and occasionally rearing up, as if something near its head was causing it infinite annoyance.

It neighed continuously, and the foam from its mouth, as, with gnashing teeth, it was turned hither and thither, splashed over the stall and at the very feet of the detective and Red Bill.

"Whoa, thar!"

Bill again attempted to get close to the horse. He was used to horses, and was not easily frightened by them. He thought if he could once get to its head, he could find out the cause of its rage, and cool it down.

But the brown horse resented any familiarity by again jumping upon its hind feet, and then dropping upon its fore feet, kicked out with all its force in the direction of Bill.

"Look out, Bill. You will get it yet if you are not careful. He means mischief," observed Peachblossom, with an amused smile.

"I don't understand how it is he don't turn himself 'round, Cap," said Red Bill, in worried tones. "I believe he hez somethin' in the stall thar."

Red Bill took no particular care for his own safety, but he had made up his mind to find out what was the matter with that brown horse, if it took him all summer.

He expressed himself in those terms, and courageously ran forward by the side of the horse.

The animal, with a neigh that was an absolute roar, tried to crush him against the side of the stall. Bill was too agile, however, and had darted back to a place of safety before the horse could accomplish his purpose, rapidly as he moved.

"Well, Bill, have you found out anything?" asked the detective, smilingly.

"Yes," gasped Red Bill, "I hev."

"Indeed! What is the matter with the horse?"

"He hez a man in thar, jammed against the manger, an' he's er-goin' ter kill him!"

"A man?"

"Yes."

"Who is the man?"

"Bull Worth," answered Red Bill, adding solemnly: "An' ther Lord hev mercy on his soul!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

BULL WORTH'S LAST NIGHT.

THE serious adjuration of Red Bill was called forth by seeing a man in as terrible a situation as could be imagined.

Notwithstanding that he considered Bull Worth a man whose death would be a blessing to society, Bill could not repress a feeling of horror that arose in his bosom when he saw the terrified face of the desperado over the horse's back.

The rifle of the man lay on the ground under the horse's hoofs, and two pistols and a knife scattered about near the rifle told that the animal—so peaceful at ordinary times, but a perfect fiend

when its temper was aroused—had disarmed Bull Worth at the very beginning of the contest.

Now the man was entirely at the mercy of the magnificent beast who seemed to be playing with him, as a cat would with a mouse, before dispatching him.

Red Bill gazed upon the scene as if spellbound, and the detective, ordinarily cool as a cucumber, betrayed his excitement now by raising his rifle two or three times, and dropping it as often, as he saw how nobly the horse held his human enemy in awe.

"It is no use! I cannot do it," he muttered. "I could shoot the man down in cold blood easier than I could do it to the horse. The fellow's life is worthless; that of the horse is valuable. No, I will let them fight it out. If Bull Worth is killed it will save the hangman a job, for I am morally certain that he is the murderer of poor old Matthew Thorne."

As the detective thus reflected he saw that the horse had ceased active hostilities, and was contenting himself with holding the man in a corner by interposing his own tremendous bulk between his victim and the only possible way of escape; viz., through the stall to the spot on which stood Peachblossom and his lieutenant, Red Bill.

"Cap, what are we goin' ter do 'bout this?" "Don't see that we can do anything, Bill."

"No, I guess not. But I hate ter see er man wiped out by er horse, no matter how or'nary ther man is."

"It cannot be helped, Bill," answered the detective, with a slight tremor in his voice, for he was perplexed. "I could not kill the horse without risking putting a bullet into Bull Worth, and I do not wish to be compelled to answer two charges of murder, instead of one, don't you see."

"Murder!" exclaimed Bill, in deep disgust. "That fat policeman from Chicago is crazy. I'll lick him when we all git home ag'in."

"He didn't bring the charge, Bill."

"Didn't he? Wal, now, I bet he's one of ther fellers ez worked up ther case, and that it's through him thar's er warrant against yer. It's just like er durned fool, ter think ez er man wheh he'd killed er man would leave his hankercher on ther face uv ther corpse, to give him away ter ther fu'st durned jackass ez come around afterward."

Peachblossom was rather surprised at this logical reasoning on the part of his lieutenant. It was not often that Red Bill said or did anything indicating that he possessed brains, his ability running generally in the way of muscular prowess and reckless bravery.

"Say, Bill, you are like a Philadelphia lawyer; I am proud of you," said the detective, with a gay laugh.

"Dunno 'bout thar. But you bet ez Red Bill kin see er hole in er ladder with ther next man."

The horse had not moved during this short colloquy. He stood with his ears thrown back, his head erect, and his great brown eyes, generally so liquid and soft, blazing with rage, as they regarded the yellow face of the cowering wretch in a corner of the stall.

Bull Worth was not lacking in courage usually, but this terrible foe, so unexpected and so merciless, had reduced him to the last ebb of deadly fear.

Let us explain how he got into his predicament.

As soon as the Chicago officers and Red Bill had followed Peachblossom up the ladder into the bedrooms, Bill had rushed down the incline to the stables, intending to pass through and reconnoiter in the vicinity of Mad Sharp's secret workshop. He did not know how the detective and Bill had got out, nor did he care.

He knew that the ranch had many means of egress and ingress that were hidden from him, and he thought it quite likely that Mad Sharp had accidentally let the prisoners out, and was perhaps in the workshop himself, for anything Bull could tell. He knew that Mad Sharp seldom did things like other people, and that it was quite within the bounds of possibility that he had let the detective and Red Bill suppose that they were at liberty to do as they pleased until it should suit the old man to teach them the opposite.

Passing through the stables the cruelty in his nature, which was of the wanton kind that delights in giving pain to defenseless animals, prompted him to go into the stall by the side of the ordinarily good-tempered brown horse, and give him a vicious poke with the muzzle of his rifle. The poor creature winced and uttered a little cry of pain that was almost human in its pathos. Instead of inducing pity on the part of Bull Worth, it amused him, and he gave the horse another poke, harder than the first.

Then he never knew how it happened—his rifle was snatched from his hand by the strong white teeth of a horse that had suddenly become a very devil, and the man had been forced into the corner of the stall to avoid the flying heels. Drawing his pistol, he attempted to shoot, but the weapon was dragged from his hand and trampled under foot. The same fate overtook his other pistol and his bowie-knife, and the

victory of the horse was complete for the time, for he had forced his human tormentor, in abject fear, to a space in the corner, where the side of the stall and the front of the feeding trough prevented the avenging heels getting at him. This was the state of affairs when Peachblossom and Red Bill came upon the scene, as related above.

"Bet yer that ther horse is jist tryin' ter think how he'll lay ther man out," observed Bill, after a pause, during which the horse had never taken his eyes from Mr. Worth.

"It will be a bad thing for Bull when he does commence, I'm afraid," responded the detective.

"Look out, Cap. Hyar's more fun!"

Red Bill spoke excitedly, for the horse had reared upright, and dropped with both feet in the manger with a terrific crash.

Bull Worth was actually under the infuriated beast. He dared not move an inch.

For a moment the horse remained in this position. Then, bending his head, he tried to seize Bull Worth's neck in his teeth, neighing the while with a sound almost like the roar of a lion.

The desperado did not utter a word. Perhaps his tongue was paralyzed. At all events, his yellow teeth were tightly set, and not a sound escaped him, save the hard breathing that he could not repress.

Suddenly a look of hope illuminated his shifty little eyes. Something had caught his attention on the ground, and he thought he saw a chance of escape.

The horse, with his two feet in the manger, found that he could not reach his enemy with his mouth, try as he might. His head swayed from side to side in his efforts, and he never ceased his energetic neighing that gave token of his frantic rage.

What had Bull Worth seen that gave him hope?

Nothing more nor less than his bowie-knife, lying almost at his feet, but underneath the horse.

If he could only reach that knife, he would make a desperate effort to release himself from his awful predicament.

He had his plan worked out completely in his mind. He would first get the knife, if he could. Then he would carefully mark the place in the horse's chest where the heart could be directly reached, and plunge the weapon into his very life.

Bull's mouth relaxed almost into a grin as he thus resolved. So easily is hope raised in even the most depraved human breast.

"What's pleased him now?" ejaculated Red Bill, as he noticed the expression of Bullard Worth's nose too handsome countenance.

"Thinks he sees a way out, perhaps," replied the detective, with a careless nod.

Bull watched the movements of the horse eagerly. The animal appeared to see that he could not overcome his enemy from his present position. So he dropped to the ground again and kicked about in a savage way for two or three minutes.

Bull crouched into his corner in safety, but in the utmost terror that those terrible hoofs or those sharp teeth would reach him even where he stood.

The horse opened his fury on the sides of the stall, and in kicking up such a dust that it nearly choked all three of the men in the vicinity. Then he quieted down, although his eyes seemed to be more threatening than ever, giving the idea that he was preparing for a still more desperate onslaught.

Bull looked down. The bowie-knife was between the forefeet of the horse, with the handle toward him. If he could stoop so as to be under the manger, perhaps he could reach out and pull the weapon away.

It would be a desperate undertaking, but then his situation was such that he must take extreme chances.

The first thing would be to get out of the corner and under the manger.

That demoniacal horse was watching his every movement, and would spring upon him the moment he left himself unprotected by the peculiar corner in which he had stowed himself.

"You brute!" he muttered. "Ef I don't fix you when I do git or strike at yer, then my name ain't Bullard Worth."

Now or never he must make the attempt.

Stooping as much as his cramped position would allow, he made a sudden dart forward.

The horse was ready for him!

As the man left the corner, the horse reared and struck with all his force at Bull's chest with his fore feet.

Luckily for Bull, the horse's aim was not quite true! The vengeful hoofs pawed the air for a moment ere they descended, and in that brief space Bull managed to swerve to one side.

The hoofs came down with a crash, one of them slightly striking the man's left arm, making it sting momentarily almost as if it had received a bullet.

Bullard uttered an involuntary exclamation as the touch with the hoof threw him at full length in front of the manger. With a presence of mind that seldom deserted him, he roll-

ed over and over, and was lying, panting with excitement and his exertions, under the manger hugging the wall, out of reach of the gigantic brown horse.

"Now, yer durned brute, I don't keer fer yer!" he hissed. "I'll git out uv this hyar, and fool all uv them fellers yet. Thet thar Drummer could help me ef he would. Cuss him! I won't ask him ter do nothin', not ef I hev ter die right now."

The horse was stamping about the stall kicking up the dust, and showing unmistakably that he was in a towering passion over the escape of his enemy at the moment that he thought he had him in his power.

"Kick away, durn yer! You can't do no harm ter me now, an' ef I wasn't in such er hurry ter git out uv this I'd let yer keep on till yer wuz tired. Thet detective feller an' Bill air hyar now, however, an' I must git out ter see what they air doin' down hyar. Them Chicago policemen must hev let him go fer some reason, an' ther fu'st thing ez I know they will be puttin' ther murder on me."

These reflections passed with lightning rapidity through the mind of Bullard Worth as he lay against the wall, and looked longingly at his knife.

To do the fellow justice, he was as courageous as the detective himself, and he did not hesitate in his resolve to try conclusions with the brown horse if he could once regain possession of his weapon.

The horse quieted down again. He could not watch Bull now, and this circumstance gave the latter encouragement. He was watching the hoofs that were planted on each side of the knife, and was trying to make up his mind as to the best method of procedure.

"I'll jist make er jump fer it. Thet's all ez I kin do!" he decided, at last.

To decide and to act were one. Bracing himself for a swift moment, he waited until he saw that the hoofs were quite still. Then he sprung out, grasped the handle of the knife, and tried to draw back into his place of refuge.

Too late!

The horse seemed to understand the situation as if by intuition, and had swung himself around so that the unhappy wretch on the ground could not get away, but was at the entire mercy of his equine enemy.

Bull Worth did not utter a cry, or allow himself to evince fear in any way. He jumped to his feet in the very face of the horse, and made an attempt to plunge the knife into his heart.

The next minute the knife had been dragged out of his hand, as the teeth of the horse grasped him by the arm, and twisting him completely around, threw him to the ground. Then the fore feet came down upon his prostrate form with tremendous force, and Bullard Worth was a crushed, shapeless mass.

He died without a groan.

CHAPTER XXVII.

TONY DOES THE HEROIC.

WE must now return to Tony and Amelia Black, who, with Marie Sharp as their prisoner, were watching Mad Sharp and Bobson embarking from the shore across the lake.

"Now, Marie, you must signal your father to send the other boat that he has over there toward us," said Amelia, quietly, to Marie.

The girl indignantly declined to obey.

"I will not do it," she said. "I'm goin' ter tell dad how you hev sarved me, an' he kin do jist what he likes with yer. Thet Drummer feller, too, hed better look out. I don't blame dad ef he wipes yer all out, an' thet's jist 'bout what he'll do, too."

"No, he won't!" was Amelia's calm response.

"He won't, eh? Wal, you jist wait till he gits across hyar."

"I don't know whether we will wait, or not!"

Amelia spoke with the most provoking calmness, in the manner of one quite certain of her ground.

Meanwhile, Mad Sharp and Bobson were paddling across to them from the shore opposite.

"Marie," said Amelia.

"Wal!"

"Listen."

Amelia bent down and whispered something in the girl's ear.

"Is that true?" asked Marie, looking at the other as if she would read her very soul.

"True as gospel," responded Amelia.

Without another word, Marie uttered a peculiar whistle, that reverberated across the water like the call of a canary.

The effect was to cause her father to stop paddling, and look inquiringly in her direction.

She repeated the signal, and he immediately turned the head of his boat toward the left, and with Bobson's help, paddled rapidly toward the land in that direction. Another boat was brought into view, which Mad towed after his own, and again headed for the spot on which he could see his daughter with her two companions.

Mad Sharp had a regular code of signals, ingeniously arranged, by which he and his daughter could speak to each other secretly wherever

they might happen to be, and no matter how many listeners might surround them.

He did not understand his daughter being at the secret entrance to his subterranean domain, but she satisfied him by the peculiar sounds she emitted that all was right, and he did not seek to know more now, although he would get details from her at some future time.

The boat had got to within a hundred yards of the island of the pit, when, in obedience to directions from Amelia, delivered in a whisper, Marie told her father to shove the loose boat toward her, and go back.

She did not tell him this in words, though she could easily have done so at this short distance, but by means of the whistles and other signals in use between them.

Mad looked a little surprised, and he stroked his venerable white beard with an air of uncertainty, but an imperious repetition of the signal by Marie made him turn around and obey her without any other sign of remonstrance.

Bobson had been looking at the girl supplicatingly and his appearance, in the large, loose clothes of Mad Sharp, with his woe-begone countenance had caused her to burst out laughing in spite of the serious complications that had arisen about her within the last hour.

"Looks more like er dyin' fish than ever," she thought, as, under her father's vigorous strokes at the paddle the boat ran swiftly back to the island on which stood the ranch.

"Good girl," said Tony, after awhile, when, Mad Sharp having landed, and Bobson, after securing the boat, having followed him, the two disappeared at the back of the house.

"Shut up," commanded Amelia, "and don't make a fool of yourself."

"I won't, if I can help it," returned Tony, humbly.

"That was well put in, because I don't think you can help it unless I am watching you all the time."

"Now," broke in Marie, "I've done what you wanted, and I think yer might take these hyar iron bracelets off my hands."

Amelia produced a handcuff key that had been given to her by the detective, and released the girl.

The three got into the boat that had been brought to them by Mad Sharp and Bobson. Then Marie took one oar and Amelia the other and the two rowed swiftly down to the other end of the lake, where, hidden in the clumps of firs, were three horses—those of Red Bill, Tony Black and Amelia.

The voyagers did not hesitate in their proceedings. With Tony doing the polite to his wife and Marie, the two latter each mounted a horse leaving Tony the oldest and slowest of the lot—that on which he had ridden down to the valley with Red Bill, but which, though he was the poorest of the three, was still a fair specimen of horseflesh. If there was anything besides his show and his wife, for which Tony Black had a weakness, it was a good horse.

"How are we to get out of this place, Marie? We took several good jumps coming into it, but, we cannot go back the same way. A horse cannot jump into the air and across a canyon at the same time," said Amelia, looking at the girl.

"I will show you."

"All right, Marie. Go ahead."

"Yes, go ahead, Marie. I want to get back to Bobson's Corners to look after my show. I've had enough of prowling about dark passages, shinning up and down ladders, getting clubbed and going without sleep. I hope Joe Grattan will get through all right, but I think I've done all that friendship demands," said Tony with great earnestness.

"You idiot!" from Amelia.

"No, 'Melie, I ain't an idiot. I'm a sensible man, with a business on my hands, and I mean to stick to it in future. My Shadowgraphs are more to me than a dozen Drummer Detectives."

Tony Black spoke defiantly, and Amelia saw that he really meant what he said. As was her custom when her liege lord took the trouble to assert himself, she did not reply. She knew that Tony had an ugly temper sometimes, and that she could easily quarrel with him for the rest of the day if she desired to do so. So, like a sensible woman she held her tongue.

"You think my father is safe so long as he keeps near the house, without going inside?" asked Marie, eagerly of Amelia, as the three rode up the rocky road that wound away around the mountain from the valley.

"Yes, I do. It will be well for him to get away as soon as he can, but I would not advise him to try and get away now."

"Um!"

The girl pressed her horse forward, hardly knowing what she did. She was in deep thought.

"I don't like to deceive her," mused Amelia. "There is not much harm in the girl beyond the fact that she is Mad Sharp's daughter, and she thinks the world of him, too; more's the pity."

Marie suddenly reined in, and turning to her, continued, as if there had been no break in the conversation:

"The police are onto him, eh? Charge him with doing something wrong out thar beyond Pueblo, eh?"

"Yes."

"Say he's been 'rustling' cattle around his ranch, eh?"

"Yes."

"Think, because some uv ther boys call him, in joke, Mad Sharp the Rustler, that he is in thet bizness, eh?"

"Yes."

[It may be stated here, for the information of the reader, that "rustling" is the term used for changing the brands on cattle in the West so that they can be stolen with facility, and that it is an offense the punishment for which is very often the lyncher's rope.]

"Whoever says Mad Sharp is er rustler is er liar. D'ye see?" added the girl, as she urged on her horse with a sharp tug at the bridle.

Tony Black here thought it proper to interfere in behalf of his wife.

"'Melie didn't say that he was a rustler, Marie. She only said that the officers were after him on that charge."

The girl apparently did not hear the little showman's explanation, and he continued, *sotto voce*, to himself:

"Me and 'Melie are telling more lies to-day than we would in the show business in half a dozen seasons. But Joe Grattan said we must get her away to Bobson's Corners somehow, and, Great Caesar's ghost, it seems to me we are doing it in great shape."

It must be remembered that neither Tony or his wife had any idea that officers really were in the valley.

The fat man and the thin man had so far not made themselves more conspicuous than they could help.

The party had now reached the first of the chasms that they had taken with a flying leap coming to the valley.

"What do you think of that?" asked Marie, pointing to a tree-trunk that spanned the opening, a little toward the side, where it had not been noticed by either Tony or his wife in their mad ride to the valley the night before.

"Very pretty," answered Tony, at a venture, for he did not know what the girl meant by her query.

"Fan and Demon walk along that bridge as easily as if they were on the ground," she went on, intimating by her tone that she considered the feat above the capacity of ordinary horseflesh.

"Well?"

"Well, we are not mounted on Fan or Demon, and I suppose we must go around. I wish we could get across it, because it would save time, and I want ter catch them thar officers at Bobson's afore they make up tha'r minds ter come to ther valley. If we go 'round, they might come this hyar way, an' ketch dad unawares."

"You say Fan and Demon walk across that tree-trunk, eh?" asked Tony, quietly.

"Yes."

"Been trained to it, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Couldn't do it at fu'st. Had to be taught with a great deal of care?"

"Of course. We put 'em along er tree laid on ther ground down thar on ther valley until they could do it. Then we let 'em walk across hyar by themselves er few times. When we see'd ez they could do it all right, we rode 'em across, an' now they're quite safe."

"Um!"

"Eh?"

"Nothing."

"I'll tell you what the idiot means, Marie."

"I wish you would."

"He always has to made so much mystery about everything he does."

"No, I don't!" put in Tony, indignantly. He was in an unusually rebellious mood to-day.

"Yes, you do. The fact is, Marie, he doesn't think Fan and Demon very wonderful because they can walk across a tree-trunk."

"He doesn't?"

"No, I doesn't," retorted Tony.

"Well, I do," said the girl. "But I do not want to waste any time. Come along. We'll go 'round!"

"Not much, we won't," answered Tony.

The girl reined in her horse and looked at the showman, who had a dogged look in his face.

"You say you had to train them there two horses of yours to walk over there," he continued, nodding toward the chasm.

"Thet's what I said."

"Well, we have three horses here that will go across safely, and they have never had any training for it at all."

"Why, you're crazy," answered the girl, scornfully.

"No, I ain't. Watch me!"

Tony suddenly directed his horse at the end of the tree-trunk, which, damp and slippery, offered a very precarious foothold, and with a few whispered words of encouragement, started him on his journey across the terrible pit.

Tony sat as rigid and straight as a bronze statue on the back of his steed, but there was not the slightest fear or doubt of the horse's footing to be seen in his face. It might truly be said that Tony Black, who was a rather commonplace little man on foot, became a hero on

horseback. Tony was not the first distinguished person of whom this has been said; Napoleon the Great had the same peculiarity. He always looked his best when in the saddle, if historians are to be believed.

Slowly but surely Tony's horse went across the perilous way. Reaching the bank on the other side, the little showman removed his hat and bowed in his most courteous manner to the ladies. Then riding back a few yards, he came tearing down, and cleared the opening at a bound.

"There, Marie, what do you think of that? These three horses are professionals. They have been in the show business all their lives—circus, melodrama and variety show—and they can do anything that horses have ever done. I would ride either of these three horses across a tight-rope if I had to. Would, sure as I live."

Tony Black was proud of his horses, although he did not think that he had done anything particularly brave in crossing on a bridge that was not worth the name, and from which a single slip on the part of his horse would have hurled him headlong to death.

"Tony, I ain't easily scared, but I don't care ter trust a horse ez I don't know, in gittin' 'cross that tree-trunk. I've been across it often enough with Fan, but I guess to-day we will go 'round," observed Marie. "This way."

She dashed away to the right and plunged into an apparently impenetrable thicket, which concealed a narrow bridle-path, by means of which they could eventually reach Bobson's Corners.

"Whatever you say," answered Tony, carelessly, as he and his wife followed Marie's lead.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE LION IN THE TOILS.

WHEN Mad Sharp, in obedience to the signal of his daughter, went around to the back of his house, with Bobson in attendance, his only intention was to go inside. He did not know what his girl meant, but he had so long lived in an atmosphere of danger that he did not doubt she had good reason for sending him away from her. He expected she would explain her conduct some time during the day, and he could afford to wait, with the happy consciousness that Marie could always take care of herself.

He waited a moment for Bobson to catch up to him—for the proprietor of Bobson's Hotel had lingered a little behind—and then strolled leisurely to the back of the house.

"Halloa!" he exclaimed, as he brought his rifle from his shoulder and held it, with his finger on the trigger, in such a way that he could send a bullet into any one facing him.

"Halloa!" was the response of a fat man, who had been examining the house closely with a very dissatisfied expression of countenance.

"What ther deuce air yer doin' hyar?" demanded Mad Sharp, beaming upon the fat man with his soft, benevolent blue eyes.

"Who are you?" demanded the fat man, in response.

"Who are you?" repeated another voice, none other than that of the thin Chicago officer.

"Halloa! Air you thar?" asked Mad Sharp.

"How are you, sir?"

The old man evidently considered the thin man an excellent joke.

Bobson had been quietly watching the fat man and the thin man during the colloquy. He thought he had seen them somewhere, but could not remember exactly where or under what circumstances.

"What is your name?" he suddenly demanded of the fat man.

"It's none of your business, as I knows of," retorted the fat man, sternly. "But I'll tell you for the information of yourself and friend. My name is Robert Skinner, of Illinois."

"Wal, Robert Skinner, of Illinois, what air yer after on private property?" put in Mad Sharp.

"Mad Sharp?"

The fat man spoke eagerly and in a manner evincing extreme surprise.

"Yes, sir. Madison Sharpe, of Pueblo, or thereabouts. My cattle ranch is near thet city, an' thet's my post-office address," answered the old man, sidling up to Mr. Robert Skinner, of Illinois, so that he could tap that gentleman on the shoulder, to emphasize his remarks.

"Madison Sharpe, of Pueblo, eh? Engaged in the cattle business? I believe I've heard of you!"

"Believe I've heard of you!" added the thin man, like an echo.

"Wal?"

"Well," repeated the fat man, slowly, as he rubbed against Mad Sharp, in an affectionate manner. "Well, I arrest you, Madison Sharpe, of Pueblo, Colorado, for cattle-stealing, and other crimes, against the peace of the State of Colorado, for which arrest I hold a warrant in my pocket."

The old man was taken so completely off his guard that he found his wrists connected by a pair of handcuffs before he realized the purport of Bob Skinner's remarks. The latter was an adept in the management of handcuffs, and

often boasted that he could fasten the hind legs of a kicking mule at one snap, if necessary.

Mad Sharp's rifle had been slung over his shoulder, but the sudden, ineffectual jerk he gave when his wrists were fastened together caused it to fall to the ground.

The old man dropped on his knees and reached for the weapon, but Robert Skinner was too wary to allow him to reach it. He bent his knees and striking Mad Sharp in the side, sent him rolling over on the ground in a most undignified manner. He could not have done it had the latter's hands been free, but, manacled as he was, Mad Sharp had lost half his powers of resistance, and was in a very wobbly state generally.

"If you don't quit your foolishness I'll fix your ankles, too!" threatened Skinner, as Mad Sharp, with a benevolent smile, emitted a string of oaths that were savage enough to make the earth tremble.

Mad Sharp threw out his feet, and striking those of the fat man nearly upset him. He did not quite succeed in doing so, and it was well for Bob Skinner that he did not. Had he done so it is likely that Chicago would have lost one of its most efficient police officers forthwith, for Mad Sharp's mild blue eyes meant murder.

"Very well, my friend! That settles it," howled the fat man, very red in the face, and with a frown of deeply offended dignity corrugating his brow.

He produced from his pocket (he seemed to be a perfect museum of pockets), a large pair of steel handcuffs, joined by a chain about eighteen inches in length, and looked at them admiringly.

Mad Sharp was sitting on the ground, as if waiting for the next move of the officer. The latter's next move was to suddenly seize one of the old man's feet and slip one of the handcuffs around his ankle. The prisoner struggled desperately to keep his other foot free, but Skinner was too quick and dexterous for him. In three seconds the other steel band was in place, and Madison Sharpe was in a state that he had not been in before since reaching manhood, in spite of the adventurous life he had led, namely—one of utter helplessness.

The officer took his prisoner's revolvers and knife from his belt—those implements having been worn by Mad so far back that he could not reach them with his handcuffed hands—and stuck them in his own belt, so that he was a perfect arsenal in appearance, resembling a barrel with the stock of a gun-store hung around him for exhibition.

But what was Bobson doing all this time? This will be the natural query of the reader, and it must be answered.

At the sudden revelation of the fat man's business by his arrest of Mad Sharp, the proprietor of Bobson's Hotel had darted forward to help the old man.

"Hold on, friend," croaked the thin man, and the hotel-keeper found himself in the embrace of a pair of very long sinewy arms that entwined him like the folds of a boa-constrictor. In fact, Bobson said afterward that he could have sworn they were each six or eight feet long, and went twice around his body.

Bobson struggled desperately, but he could no more throw off the grip of the thin officer than if he had been in the embrace of an octopus. Nat Long, the thin officer, was a man of few words, but one of his favorite observations, when he did speak, was: "When I takes hold of a man, he's got to come!"

"Hold on, now. You may just as well be quiet! You can't get away," he murmured gently, into Bobson's ear, as he kept his eye on Bob Skinner and Mad Sharp, and saw with satisfaction that the latter had been overcome by his comrade.

"Cuss you!" hissed Bobson.

"Certainly! Cuss away all you want. It won't bother me worth a cent," responded Nat Long, with the most pronounced *sang froid*.

By this time the fat officer had reduced Mad Sharp to a state of subjection, and was looking down upon the old man with a glance of triumph.

"Have you got anything against this fellow?" The thin man was holding Bobson in a loving embrace, as if he were a long-lost brother, and was looking over his shoulder at Skinner without the least regard for the opinion of his prisoner.

"I don't know yet. I haven't a warrant for him, but perhaps the people in Denver may want him for something. Anyhow, we can arrest him for interfering with an officer," replied the fat man, coolly.

"For interfering with an officer," echoed Nat Long.

Before Bobson knew what was taking place, he found himself hand-cuffed and disarmed, and almost as helpless as Madison Sharpe.

"Nat," said the fat officer.

"Yes."

"Do you think you can handle those two fellows, for a while? I must stay here and look out for Joe Grattan."

"How?"

"Why, he's in this house, isn't he? And I have a warrant for his arrest, haven't I? If he

is in the house he must come out some time. I propose to stay here until he does come out. Then I will take him in."

"Good idea. But—"

The thin man hesitated. He evidently was used to deferring to his comrade.

"Go on, Nat. Tell me what you think," said Bob Skinner, encouragingly, with an air that said, almost as plainly as words: "You do not know much, but I will forgive you for making a fool of yourself."

"Well, I was going to say that it would be better to take these gentlemen to Bobson's Corners and lock them up somewhere, first—"

"And have Grattan get away in the meantime," interrupted Bob, musingly. "No, that would not do."

"But, see here, Grattan won't come out of the house till dark. He will be afraid to. Well, you can come back before that, and be ready for him. It will be much better to have these two fellows out of the way—in the cellar of Bobson's Hotel, where I can keep guard while you hunt for Joe. He won't give you any trouble. At least I don't think so."

"I do not care if he does. I'm ready for any trouble he may make."

Bob Skinner touched the weapons hanging about him with a determined air, and scowled fiercely at Mad Sharp, who sat at his feet, stroking his venerable beard, and looking mildly at him from his wide-open blue eyes.

"Well, what do you think of my plan, Bob?" persisted the thin officer.

"I don't know that it is a very sensible idea," answered his comrade, slowly, for he disliked to acknowledge that Nat could originate any feasible scheme, "but I will try it, just to please you."

The fat man evidently thought that he had made a point by this last sentence, for he repeated it, with added emphasis:

"Just to please you."

"Don't you think it is the best thing to do?"

"No, I do not; but I will do it, just to please you, Nat—just to please you."

"But perhaps—" faltered the thin man.

"Don't say another word, Nat. It will be a bad thing if Joe Grattan escapes while I am away, but I will do it, just to please you."

The thin man saw that this was an ingenious arrangement by which all the blame could be thrown upon his shoulders in case of miscarriage of the business, but he could not help himself. Bob Skinner had got him into a corner, as it were, and would keep him there in spite of all his efforts to extricate himself.

Half an hour later Mad Sharp was sitting sideways on the saddle of his horse Demon, for the officers would not trust him with his feet unfastened, and was holding on with his manacled hands to the mane. Bobson was astride of Marie's pet dappled-gray, Fan, and the two officers, on their own horses, which had been left near the ranch when they entered to arrest Joe Grattan, rode one on each side of the prisoners; Bob Skinner ready to help Mad Sharp if he should reveal a tendency to fall from his saddle.

The old man was safe enough, however. He was a splendid horseman, and Demon was as docile as a child when he heard his master's voice, and knew that his master's weight was on his back.

When the party reached the tree-trunk that spanned the chasm, the two officers looked inquiringly at Mad. He smiled grimly, and his blue eyes sparkled with a sort of savage merriment that those who knew him dreaded more than any other manifestation he could make.

His mind was busy however, and he decided at once that he would worst the officers in their plan of taking him to Bobson's Corners. He was well known in that locality—known and feared—and he had an idea that there were men who would put a hand to his rescue as soon as they saw his situation.

"Round to ther right thar, gentlemen," he cooed, in his softest tones.

He pointed out the hidden path in the clump of firs, by means of which his daughter had not very long before led Tony and Amelia Black in the direction of Bobson's Corners, although Mad Sharp was unaware of the fact. He did not know where his girl was, but he supposed, in a general way, that she was somewhere in the valley, and he would not have been surprised to hear her rifle crack and see one of his captors fall over dead at any moment.

The path was soon found, and the party filed through it, Mad Sharp riding first, then Bob Skinner, then Bobson, and Nat Long bringing up the rear.

The afternoon was far advanced when at last they came within sight of Bobson's Hotel.

They approached it by the winding road from behind, and after pausing a few moments to take in the situation, and seeing that, with the exception of two miners loafing on the front piazza, and a group of Tony Black's people hovering about his show lot in the distance, there was no one about, Bob marshaled his cavalcade at the back door of Bobson's Hotel.

"This is a nice thing—to be brought a prisoner to my house," growled Bobson.

"What are yer grumblin' bout?" asked Mad,

with his saintly smile. "Seems ter me it's er good deal worse ter be taken 'way from yer own home a prisoner. Eh, fatty?"

This last query was addressed to Bob Skinner, and his indignation at being addressed as "Fatty" was so pronounced that the thin man laughed a sepulchral. "Ha, ha!" before he knew what he had done.

The fat man was about to say something when his attention was directed to Mad Sharp, who, springing from his horse, shuffled into the back entrance of the hotel, with the chains about his legs—and with a wild cry that no personal ill could have drawn from him, exclaimed:

"Marie, my gal!"

The next minute Marie was clinging around his neck, sobbing in an ecstasy of excitement and indignation.

CHAPTER XXIX.

GETTING NEAR THE TREASURE.

WHEN the brown horse in Mad Sharp's stables had gained his victory over Bullard Worth he seemed to know that the man was dead. He looked him over when he had satisfied himself that he had crushed the life out of his victim, and at once he came as mild and gentle as usual.

Peachblossom, who had not anticipated such a frightful ending to the combat, went boldly into the stall and seized the halter that hung loosely from the horse's head.

The animal did not make any objection to the detective's presence. He seemed to have spent all his fury upon the mangled form at his feet.

"Let us take the body out, Bill. Poor wretch! His crimes have been expiated."

Red Bill did not quite understand the detective's pity for the dead desperado, nor the terms in which it was expressed, but he went forward at once and helped to remove all that was left of Bullard Worth, the horse regarding the proceeding curiously, but making no attempt to interfere.

The two living men covered the dead one with a horse-rug, after laying it in one of the empty stalls, and picking up the weapons that had been knocked from his hands by the horse, laid them by his side. The bowie-knife was still grasped in the rigid fingers, and they made no effort to remove it.

"Now, Bill," said the detective, when their ghastly task was concluded, "let us get to our work in that room. We cannot keep Mad Sharp out of his house much longer. He may have other means of entrance of which we know nothing, for he is a crafty old fox."

"You bet. Wal, I'm ready, Cap."

They found the secret room just as they had left it, with the door half open, and the bags that they had slept upon, in front of the furnace, still in their place.

The first job was to remove the furnace, for the chart showed that the treasure was buried immediately below it.

At this work Red Bill proved himself an expert. It required strength, and plenty of it, and Bill was in possession of muscles of steel, and a constitution that hardly knew the meaning of fatigue.

The floor was solid rock, apparently, at a casual glance, hewn smooth for the purpose. There was not a crack or a seam to be distinguished.

Under the furnace a plate of iron lay, as if to protect the place from fire, though, considering the whole floor was of stone, it was not easy to understand how the iron could give extra safety.

Peachblossom had noticed this seeming incongruity and had drawn his own conclusions therefrom.

The four iron feet of the furnace were screwed down to the floor, but there were several large screw-drivers and other tools in the room, ready to their hands, and it took but a very few moments to draw out the long screws. Then the detective, with a rueful glance down his much-soiled Prince Albert coat, garnished as it was with his pistol-belt, but still retaining something of the stylish look that he somehow imparted to all his clothes involuntarily, took hold of one side of the dirty furnace, and, with Red Bill's help, dragged it from the iron plate.

It was no easy task, nor was it done quickly. It took at least an hour to get the furnace from its place, and, by that time, Peachblossom felt almost as dirty as he had been after his memorable ride among the wheels of the cars on the "Thunderbolt" train.

"Whew!" he whistled at last, as the furnace rocked itself clear of the plate.

They had brought a lamp from a small closet in a corner of the room, and discovering a bracket with a reflector on the wall, had placed the lamp there, with the result that the room was well-lighted, especially with the aid of the lantern that hung on the opposite side.

The detective took the lantern down, and kneeling upon the floor, brushed the dirt away from the top of the iron plate. He forgot all about his usual horror of dirt in his eagerness. A few minutes was sufficient time for him to

make up his mind that the iron plate had no connection with the hiding-place of the will and treasure except, mayhap, to conceal it.

"The iron slab has to come up, Bill."

"That's what I thought," returned Red Bill, phlegmatically.

If it was hard to remove the furnace, it was still more troublesome to get the iron plate from its position. It had been fastened down by long spikes, corrugated diagonally to make them hold better, and the slab was almost as solid as the rocky floor itself.

Fortunately for the two men, there were tools of all kinds in the little room. Red Bill poked about and brought out two steel crowbars, bent at the ends, and each sharpened almost to a knife-edge at the point.

To get these sharpened points under one edge of the slab required much labor and no little ingenuity. Two heavy mallets of hickory, iron-bound, were discovered, and with them the detective and Red Bill banged away at the tops of the crowbars until they had forced their points about an inch under the edge of the slab. Try as they would, they could not get them in any further.

"Let us try what we can do with leverage now," said Peachblossom.

"All right, Cap."

They tugged away at the crowbars, which, from their peculiar shape exercised tremendous force upon the iron.

All of no avail. They could not get the crowbars any further in, nor could they make the iron move, with all their exertions.

"Hold on, Bill! We are killing ourselves for nothing, it seems to me."

Red Bill did not answer, but he ceased tugging at the crowbar.

The detective then knelt down again, and taking his bull's-eye lantern from his pocket, directed its sharp rays of light all over the slab. He suspected something.

"I don't see how we are to pull those spikes out of there, Bill. They are evidently a tremendous length, and they grip the rock like grim death."

"Yes, Cap," answered Red Bill, in his matter-of-fact way.

Peachblossom brushed the dirt from one particular spot of the slab near the center. Something had caught his eye, through the dirt, and now that he had cleaned the slab at that spot, it stood revealed as a disk of brass about as large as a silver dollar.

"Give me a punch and a mallet," he said, briefly, to his follower.

"Yes, Cap."

An iron punch was placed in the detective's hand. He put the end of the punch on the disk and struck with all his force.

The slab trembled in a way that all their efforts with crowbars had not been sufficient to make it do.

"Eureka!" cried Peachblossom, triumphantly.

"Eh?"

Red Bill thought the word was some new form of swearing.

"Never mind, Bill. I mean that I have discovered the secret at last."

"Is that what that thar word you used means, Cap?" asked Bill, respectfully.

"Yes, something of the kind. Now for another bang at the slab."

He hammered on the disk again and again, each blow making the slab tremble more and more. At last there was a loud sliding and creaking noise underneath like the drawing of rusty bolts. At the same time the slab trembled violently, and to the astonishment of Red Bill, who happened to be looking at the heads of two of the great iron spikes, they sunk through the iron plate, leaving holes instead, through which the heads could still be discerned below.

Red Bill was the victim of a common optical delusion. The heads of the spikes had not sunk, but the plate had risen a little, producing the same effect. One thing was certain, however, and that was that the spikes were only "dummies." They did not hold the plate down at all, but had been put in to draw attention from the real fastenings. The brass disk was the key to the secret treasure cave, and ordinarily one smart blow was sufficient to draw back the hidden bolts. It had taken a great deal of hammering at this time because the iron slab had not been removed for many years.

The slab was now entirely loose, and was only held down by its own weight. This, however, was considerable, and Peachblossom and Red Bill had to work pretty hard with their crowbars before they got it away and revealed a hole not more than six inches deep and about a foot square.

"Don't seem ter be nothin' thar, now we hev found it," remarked Bill, as he put his hand into the hole and pulled out a lot of loose earth and stones.

"Patience, Bill," admonished the detective.

"Yes, Cap."

"Take out all that dirt and examine it carefully."

"Yes, Cap."

Bill went to work at one side of the hole and the detective at the other. They took out the

dirt by handfuls until the hole was nearly empty, showing that it was cut squarely in the rock, and that it did not contain the tin box and the gold-dust as the detective had expected.

"That is strange," he muttered. "What reason could old Matthew Thorne have had for deceiving me? Here is the exact place, and I have actually found the secret receptacle. But where are the things? Could they have been removed by some one who knew of the secret? Hardly. Old Matthew Thorne was the only living person knowing of it, and he had the chart and note-book containing the directions. Strange—very, very strange!"

Red Bill had stopped work during his companion's soliloquy, feeling that, somehow, their work was going to be a failure, although he did not express his apprehensions in words.

Now, the detective, in a discouraged way, carelessly took out the last few handfuls of dirt and allowed it to sift through his fingers outside the hole.

"Ah! What is this?"

Something had remained in his hand, when the dust had sifted out of it—something hard and sharp at the edges.

It was a flat brass key!

"Hello! Found somethin', Cap?" asked Bill, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Yes, Bill, I have. But I do not know what I am to do with it. It evidently opens a lock somewhere. But where is the lock?"

"That's so," observed Bill, with a feeble air of agreeing with anything that might be said.

The detective was sitting on the ground, in the midst of the dust and dirt, rubbing the brass key in his hand till it shone like new gold.

Evidently the key had something to do with the secret he was trying to probe, but how it was to be applied he did not know. The key was only half the secret, and the poorest half at that.

"Bill, I don't know that I am much nearer to the end of my task than I was before I found this hole, nor have I the least idea where to look for it now. This is pretty hard, after all our work."

"That's so, Cap."

The detective, having polished one side of the key, now devoted his attention to the other. The dirt and tarnish was easily removed, and soon both sides of the little flat brass key shone alike.

"Halloa!"

The detective uttered this exclamation in an excited tone, and Red Bill knew at once that something else had struck him.

The detective was looking closely at the side of the key that he had just been polishing, with his small, powerful lantern held close to it.

He had noticed letters and figures upon it that might mean something.

"M x D. V.—1—19."

These were the signs upon the key.

The detective looked at them long and earnestly, but could not make anything of them.

"A cipher, of course, but what is the use of it if I haven't any key to it?"

"Say, Cap."

"Well, answered the detective, despondently.

"Why don't you look at them notes that old Matthew Thorne give yer?"

"Bill, you have more sense than I have. I confess I never thought of it," responded the detective, rapturously, as he took from his pocket the chart and the paper on which Matthew Thomas had written his directions for finding the treasure.

CHAPTER XXX.

FOUND AT LAST.

"Hold up my lantern, Bill, so that I can look carefully through these notes," said the detective, as, for want of a better table, he spread out the papers on the furnace.

"All right, Cap. I hope it will come out all right," answered Bill, holding up the lantern as directed.

"I hope so," observed Peachblossom, mechanically, as he looked eagerly through the notes for something that should explain the letters and figures on the brass key.

He found all the directions for tracing out the hole in which he had expected to find the will and the gold-dust, but not a word about a key with a cipher on it. There was a good deal of writing upon the paper, for old Matthew Thorne was very methodical, and he had made the directions too plain to be misunderstood.

"It's no use, Bill. There is nothing here to give me any clew. I am afraid that I must give it up, after all. I suppose Matthew Thorne was deceived himself. Even if he did know anything more about the matter than appears here, it would be of no use to me now. He is dead, and I—great heavens!—am charged with his murder. It has been a bad business all through. I suppose the best thing now will be to make sure of Mad Sharp for this counterfeiting performance of his, and give up the search for the will for the present."

"But what about Bob Skinner? He will grab us both as soon as we get outside the house," suggested Red Bill, carelessly.

"I don't suppose they are waiting around here all this time, and if they are we must dodge

them somehow. I cannot afford to be arrested till I get back to Chicago. Once there, I can clear myself, and prove that Matthew Thorne was killed by the man lying dead in the stable of this ranch."

"How?"

"Easily enough. He had the chart and note-book in his pocket that the old man kept securely locked up in his table-drawer, and which we know were concealed about his person when we left him at the beginning of this week," answered the detective.

Something here struck Red Bill with such force that he actually staggered back.

"Say, Cap!"

"Well?"

"Whar is that old note-book that you took from Bull Worth?"

"In my pocket."

"Let me see it."

Red Bill spoke almost imperiously in his anxiety.

"Let you see it," said the detective. "Why?"

He took out the greasy old note-book as he spoke, however, and held it out.

"I don't want it, Cap. But—you look through it, and see whether thar ain't somethin' explainin' the letters on the key."

Peachblossom jumped at this idea, and began to turn over the yellow, worn leaves hastily.

"Ah! Here is something," he exclaimed, at last.

"Whar?"

The detective did not answer. He was busily following up certain figures and words that had caught his eye on the first page of the note-book. They read as follows:

"See 45—M. D. V—1—19."

"That must mean something," he mused. What is this about 45?"

He looked closely at the brass key to make sure that he had not inadvertently overlooked the "45" while reading off the other figures.

No, there was certainly nothing like "45" anywhere on the key.

"What's ther matter, Cap?" asked Bill, who had been watching his companion's face, and now saw that it wore a disappointed expression.

"I cannot get it, Bill. Or, rather, I haven't yet. But I will before I am through with it, as sure as my name is Joe Grattan."

The detective looked hard at the figures and letters in the book for over a minute. Then a smile chased the troubled frown from his brow as he hastily turned over the leaves.

"Got it, Cap."

"Don't know. I hope so."

"Let me see. Page, 43, 44, 45. Now! Ha! It is, by gracious. What a fool I was not to understand that at once. The sentence on the first page has an index, and meant, refer to page 45 for explanation of M. D. V—1—19."

"Say Cap, you're er genius," declared Red Bill, admiringly.

"I don't feel like one, Bill; in fact, I do not seem to have the commonest of sense," answered the detective, as he read down through page 45.

"Why, this is a scrap from a city Directory, it appears to me. It's nothing more than a string of names and addresses," he continued. Hallo, what is this? 'Madeline de Vere,' with the initial letters of the names in heavy type, so that the M. D. V. stand out boldly from the rest of the page. Yes, and here are some more words scattered through the page, having no connection with each other, except that they are in italics, while the other reading matter is in ordinary type."

"You're gittin' thar, Cap."

"Wait, Bill. Yes, here it is. The italic words picked out here and there, read when strung together, M. D. V. northeast house, 1—19—corner."

"What do yer make uv thar, Cap?"

"I don't know till I try. But I have an idea. Come, Bill; we'll see what we can find out. Get your weapons, and bring that spade from the corner of the room."

As we have said, there were tools of all kinds in the little room, and a spade was one of the implements that stood in a corner.

The detective, with a lantern in his hand, went straight away through the passage, passed the body of Bull Worth in the stable, glanced at the brown horse, which was now quietly eating the oats given to him by Red Bill before the latter had followed the detective to the little room—and ascending to the dining-room looked around in every direction.

It was empty, as indeed the whole house appeared to be, save for himself and Red Bill.

Peachblossom knew how to manage the traps leading to the roof from the bedrooms, pretty well by this time, and it did not take him long to gain the outside of the house, with Red Bill at his elbow.

"Now, Bill, this is the northeast corner of the house, isn't it?"

"Yes, Cap."

"Well, I am going to see what I can find in this neighborhood. I will take the northeast corner. Then I will measure, with this two-foot rule that I took the liberty of bringing from Mr. Sharpe's workshop, nineteen feet in a northeast direction from the house."

The detective suited the action to the word as

he spoke, and carefully measuring seventeen feet with his rule, found that it brought him to a large boulder deeply imbedded in the soft earth.

"Bill, I have an idea that this stone has something to do with the hidden treasure. Help me move it."

With considerable exertion they dragged the great rock away, revealing a hole where it had lain at least a foot deep.

"Um! I don't know just what to think about this," muttered Peachblossom. "I was expecting to find something one foot from the surface, and here this stone leaves a hole a foot deep and over, with nothing in sight. I don't just understand it."

"Say, Cap."

"Well?"

"Praps it's a foot lower than ther hole."

The detective shook his head, doubtfully.

"Not very likely, Bill. But we will try it. Give me the spade."

The ground was soft and Peachblossom shoveled out the earth rapidly. At last his spade struck against something hard, and awoke a responsive echo of hope in his heart.

He dug away harder than ever, his spade hitting the hard object at every stroke.

At last, he could restrain himself no longer. He knelt down and pulled the earth out with his hands. Then with a tremendous tug, he brought forth a tin box, some eight inches square, and fastened with a brass padlock, and brushed the dirt from the top of it.

"Hurrah!" yelled Bill.

"Hush! There may be some one around. It would not do to let this fall into the hands of old Sharpe. And I have been so anxious over this that I have never thought of him, or of Bob Skinner either, for the last hour. I do not want to be disturbed now."

It was getting dark, the sun having disappeared behind the great mountains in the West some minutes, but there was neither sight nor sound of any human being in the valley besides themselves.

"I must look inside to see if this box is all right, at any risk," said the detective, taking the brass key from his pocket.

Yes, the key fitted the lock, and with one turn the lid of the box was open.

The sole contents were a yellow, soiled sheet of legal cap, indorsed "Last will and testament of William De Vere, January 17, 1865."

"That is right," cried the detective, in ecstasy, as he arose to his feet.

"Say, Cap?"

"Yes."

"What about the twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold dust?"

"By Heaven, Bill, I had forgotten it for the moment. I suppose it is here."

"I hope so."

Bill dug away at the hole, and soon had four bags of the precious dust, each rudely painted with the figures \$5,000.

"Say, Cap, hyar's er fortune for yer. How air yer goin' ter carry it?"

Before Peachblossom could reply, both he and Red Bill were neatly and expeditiously handcuffed, and looking, in the dim light, into the faces of Bob Skinner and Nat Long.

"We'll help you," said Bob, with a sarcastic grin.

"Yes, we'll help you," croaked his echo, the attenuated Nathan.

CHAPTER XXXI.

MAD SHARP'S ESCAPE.

"WE'RE prisoners, eh?" exclaimed Peachblossom, as he stooped and picked up with his manacled hands the precious tin box, that had fallen to the ground when he had been so suddenly captured.

"Yes, Mr. Grattan, you are; and I'll take care you don't get away this time, if I know it," replied the fat officer.

"What are you going to do with us?"

"We are going to take you to Bobson's Corners, in the first place, where it will not be so easy for you to give us the slip. After that I shall see about getting you to Chicago with all speed. I don't care about having a murderer on my hands longer than I can help."

"Murderer!" cried Peachblossom, fiercely. Then, recollecting himself, he smiled, and continued: "Have you horses for us, or shall we have to walk to Bobson's Corners?"

"We have horses for you."

"Thanks!" observed Red Bill, it being the first word he had uttered since his arrest.

They mounted Peachblossom on Marie Sharpe's dappled gray, Fan, and putting Red Bill on Demon, mounted their own horses and rode away with their prisoners, as they had a few hours before with Mad Sharp and Bobson, in Bobson's Corners.

The fat officer had produced a stout piece of string from some of his many pockets, and tied the bags together in pairs. He slung one pair of bags across his own horse and the other across that of Nat Long. The tin-box, containing the precious will, the detective was allowed to carry.

In due time they reached Bobson's Hotel, where the prisoners were ushered into an upper

room from which it would have been impossible to escape without being seen by some of the people loafing outside.

Leaving Nat to watch Peachblossom and Red Bill, the fat officer bustled down-stairs, and, in a few minutes brought up Mad Sharp, still fastened hand and foot, with Bobson behind him. They were followed by Marie—who hastened to her father's side—and Tony and Amelia Black.

"Wal, now, what d'ye want with me?" demanded Mad Sharp, sullenly, but beaming mildly upon the fat officer with his soft blue eyes, notwithstanding.

"I have a warrant for you, for rustling, Madison Sharpe. The authorities of Denver will attend to your case," answered Skinner, coolly. Then he went on, turning to Peachblossom: "I have a warrant for you for the murder of Matthew Thorne."

"You seem to be full of warrants," laughed the detective carelessly.

"The less you say the better for you," admonished the fat officer, in a dignified manner. "Anything you say is liable to be used against you."

The detective laughed again as he heard this well-worn form of speech that is always addressed to prisoners charged with grave crimes before they are put on trial.

"Am I a prisoner?" demanded Marie.

"And am I?" asked Bobson.

"Release the girl," said Bob, in his most magisterial manner. "We have nothing directly against her, though she may be required as a witness in Denver when Madison Sharpe gets his trial."

"May I speak, Mr. Skinner?" asked the detective with veiled mockery.

"Yes, I guess it won't do any harm as long as you do not talk about the murder," answered the fat man, with dignity.

"I wish to open this box in the presence of the people here. It will be necessary to have witnesses, perhaps. Will you take the handcuffs off my wrists?"

The fat officer, who felt sure that Peachblossom would not attempt to escape, although he would not confess it, made a sign to the thin man, and the latter removed the handcuffs.

The detective took up the box from the table against which he had been leaning, opened it, and produced the will.

"I will read this will here, because I think perhaps it concerns some one not very far from me."

"Where did you get that?" yelled Mad Sharp, suddenly, as he comprehended what the detective's proceedings meant.

"I found it in the vicinity of your house and the valley, Mr. Sharpe," returned the detective politely.

"It is mine—mine—mine!" howled Mad Sharp, as he fell into one of his rare fits of rage, in which the benevolent expression of his face disappeared entirely.

The detective did not answer this outburst, but went on:

"This will, signed by William De Vere, in presence of Matthew Thorne, January 17, 1865, leaves to Madeline De Vere, the whole of his estates in Chicago, valued at \$2,000,000, for her sole use and benefit, to dispose of absolutely as she pleases."

"Ha, ha, Marie! You're er rich girl, at last! Now, I don't care for anything," yelled Mad Sharp.

All looked at the old man in intense astonishment except the detective. He was half-expecting something of the kind.

"The will goes on to say that Madison De Vere, father of Madeline De Vere, is to be the executor of the will."

"That's me—me—me! My name is Madison De Vere. My gal, Marie, is Madeline De Vere. She has been kept out of her rights all her life. She wuz only a year old when that will wuz made. But she'll git her rights now, an' I don't care!"

The old man had been gradually working himself nearer to Bob Skinner, while speaking. Suddenly he swooped down upon that gentleman, and dragging a revolver from his belt, put it to his own head and pulled the trigger.

The scene shifts to Chicago, where, in the office of the dead Matthew Thorne, Peachblossom has just proved conclusively that Bull Worth committed the murder that had been enwrapped in so great mystery.

A dried-up specimen of an attorney was there, in company with a handsome, well-dressed young man—none other than Norman De Vere, second cousin of Madeline De Vere, hitherto known to the reader as Marie Sharpe.

She is here in this dingy office, too, and there have been a good many sly glances cast at her by Norman, who is evidently deeply impressed with her fresh young beauty.

"Yes, this will be all right as far as it goes," said the dried-up attorney, as he carefully read the paper that the detective had secured with so much difficulty and peril, "but, unfortunately for Miss De Vere, we have another one dated five years later, giving everything to Norman De Vere except the sum of \$20,000 in gold dust, buried with a former will in Colorado, the

hiding-place of which had been confided to Matthew Thorne."

Peachblossom hastily examined the new will that the dried-up attorney produced (or, rather a copy of it, for the man of law was too cautious to carry the original about with him), and saw that it was correct.

"So the hunt for the will amounts to nothing after all," he said, with something like a sigh.

Madeline De Vere did not mind the loss of the fortune very much. She had plenty of money left her by her father, which he may or may not have made honestly, for it was shown that he had carried on an extensive counterfeiting business, besides getting so many extra cattle on his ranch near Pueblo as to have gained the equivocal title of "Mad Sharp the Rustler."

But, there was another reason why Madeline did not care much. She became Mrs. Norman De Vere in less than a year from the day that she stood in Matthew Thorne's old office and learned that the will found by the Drummer Detective was of no value.

The secrets of Mad Sharp's ranch in the valley near Bobson's Corners were never revealed. The ranch and the underground passage remain as they were when he killed himself in the hotel. The property belongs to Madeline, but she has never had the heart to go there again. The only reminder she has of the old place is her dappled-gray, Fan, and her father's black horse, Demon. The two horses are never used except for the saddle, and no one is allowed to ride them save Madeline herself and her beloved husband, Norman. The two horses, with the happiest married couple in Chicago, on their backs, are often seen in the late summer afternoons on the fashionable drives of the city, but no one knows the bright young wife's past history, and Norman De Vere has always been a respected and popular young man in the great metropolis of the West.

Joe Grattan, although his home life is of the happiest, cannot keep out of the profession he loves so well, and in which he has been so successful. He is still known throughout the Great West as Peachblossom, the Drummer Detective, and Red Bill is still his faithful follower.

Bobson's Hotel, though a flourishing hostelry still, bears another name. Its former proprietor is doing a long term in State Prison for his connection with Mad Sharp, in the counterfeiting business. Bobson's Corners, too, has gone out of existence as far as its name is concerned, although the place is well known to travelers by stage from Pueblo, under another designation.

Tony Black has a very extensive show now, in which he is making a great deal of money. His Shadowgraphs are renowned in every city and town from the Atlantic to the Pacific. His wife, Amelia, henpecks him occasionally, but she has a great deal of respect for him inwardly, and he thinks his 'Melia' is the smartest woman that ever drew breath.

In one of the cemeteries in Chicago is a handsome mausoleum. The inscription upon the marble is simply "Madison Sharpe. Born Feb. 5, 1828. Died June 14, 1885." That is all. But old residents of Colorado, who happen to know the story, point it out to less well-informed friends as the last resting-place—provided by a loving daughter—of a man who misused his opportunities, and who is remembered but too well in the neighborhood of Pueblo as Mad Sharp, the Rustler.

THE END.

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